Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion

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Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion

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Foreword

Michael Barkun

These are boom times for conspiracy theories. They thrive, as the chapters in this volume attest, in virtually every corner of the world. They have infiltrated popular culture. They have become the political fodder for demagogues. The internet and social media have extended their reach from fringe coteries to mass audiences. Most—perhaps all—of course turn out to be empirically false. The broader they spread, the more serious a problem they pose for those of us trained to distinguish between truth and falsehood, since we must increasingly operate in a milieu in which the boundary between truth and falsity has become blurred for many people. Conspiracy theories contribute to what some have called a "post-truth" environment.

I did not start out intending to study conspiracy theories. I came upon them, more or less by accident. Their presence in my line of vision was a byproduct of a long-standing interest in millenarian movements. It is not uncommon for such movements to see the end of history in terms of a final struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and to conceptualize evil as a conspiracy whose minions work in secret to storm the battlements of virtue.

When I began to look at such groups, in the 1970s, I paid much more attention to millennialists' visions of a perfect future than I did their fears about the evil enemy that needed to be crushed. After all, they believed that God in His own good time would take care of that. However, by the late 1980s and early '90s, I began to see things differently. American evangelicals, most of whom were millennialists, had become politically mobilized for the first time in decades. On the radical right, racist millenarians like Christian Identity believers were arming themselves for apocalyptic battle. Conspiracy tracts like Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and Pat Robertson's *The New World Order* sold in the millions of copies.

In this kind of atmosphere, I could hardly escape looking at conspiracy theories anymore. They were not only an integral part of many millenarian belief systems, they had begun to seep into the consciousness of the larger society. That process has accelerated in succeeding decades.

If there was any doubt about how deeply conspiracy theories had penetrated in the United States, it was resolved by the election of Donald Trump in 2016. He had entered public life as a support of the "birther" conspiracy theory alleging that his predecessor, Barack Obama, had hidden his foreign birth. Trump's campaign was filled with additional conspiracy themes that now found their way into the mainstream.

Clearly, not all of these developments have had demonstrable links to religion. However, the belief that key decisions are made, as it were, behind a curtain by a hidden "they" has religious implications even when neither a religious organization nor a deity is invoked. It implies a universe ruled by invisible powers that cannot be placated, and that are therefore deaf to pleas, prayers, or sacrifices. Instead, the world is the scene of a Manichean struggle between the polar powers of good and evil.

If we look at the most sweeping conspiracy theories, they insist that nothing happens by accident; that nothing is as it seems; and that everything is connected. Yet these salient characteristics are strikingly similar to the features of many religious belief systems. To be sure, this is not to say that religions are conspiracy theories, only that there are structural similarities that sometimes lead them to join hands.

Whether or not that happens, conspiracy theories, like some religions, envision a clash between good and evil. The end result of such a battle depends both on the contents of the conspiracy theory and the relationship between the theory and the believer. For conspiracy theories that are integral parts of religious beliefs, the outcome is often automatic and involves the defeat of the conspirators. Where the beliefs and the believers are secular, the result may appear more problematic. However, even for secular believers the theory itself begins to take on the characteristics of a sacred scripture. It is privileged knowledge, the possession of initiates who alone see the world in its true light, through the lens that conspiracism provides. If they can convert enough people to their views, perhaps they can overpower the conspirators. In the meantime, they live on a knife-edge, never quite sure whether good or evil will triumph.

The future of conspiracy theories is murky. Conspiracism has experienced peaks and valleys, and it is reasonable to expect that at some point we will begin to descend from the present peak. At the moment, however, the vogue for conspiracy theories shows no signs of abating. This is so because conspiracy theories persist as long as official narratives and explanations prove unconvincing and simpler, more radical alternatives exist to challenge and potentially displace them. In a milieu where authorities of all kinds are under attack—political, religious, academic—the first condition is clearly present. That, in turn, generates a continuing appetite for the second, and there seems no shortage of conspiracy-mongers eager to cater to it. An abundance of conspiracy-minded sectarians and their secular counterparts crowd the internet and social media, selling plots to a growing clientele seeking simple answers to complex problems.

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Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion

David G. Robertson, Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal

1 Objective of the Book

Conspiracy theories are one of the defining issues of our age. With the polarised rhetoric of recent elections in Europe and the USA, international terrorism, the growth of new media, and increasing distrust of government and other institutions, the role of conspiracy in explaining the world and motivating people has begun to be taken seriously by policy makers, the media, and academia. Whilst research on conspiracy theories is growing and receiving increasing support, two challenges stand out: it remains disciplinarily fragmented, and it is limited in scope. Parallel literatures are emerging in the disciplines that have devoted themselves to the topic, often conceptualising the object of study in different terms: one for the psychologists, another for the historians, yet another among political scientists or cultural studies scholars. Across these literatures, the scope tends to be narrowly 'Western', structured around available populations (typically Western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic—or WEIRD), or paradigmatic cases of a traumatic character (anti-Semitism and Fascism; 9/11; dead celebrities).

Scholars of religion, who tend to be methodologically promiscuous and comfortable with cultural diversity, potentially have a lot to offer these discussions. Indeed, the last decade has seen a rapid increase in interest in conspiracy theories within the study of religion, as demonstrated by several chapters on the topic in textbooks and anthologies,[1] and panels at major academic conferences.[2] An obvious reason for this is the discourse around religion, politics, and terrorism, in which conspiratorial narratives often connect the three domains. But, we argue, religious studies may also stand to make considerable theoretical gains by engaging conspiracy theories in light of the major developments in the field since the 1990s. For example, relating to the discursive and critical

1 For example, in the *Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, vol. 2 (Dyrendal 2016), and *The Occult World* (Barkun 2016).

2 Notably, at the 2012 British Sociological Association, Sociology of Religion group (SOCREL) conference in Chester, the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR) conference at Liverpool in 2013, and the 2015 joint conference of the EASR and the International Association of the History of Religion (IAHR) in Erfurt, Germany.

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turn: how do we conceptualise and work with terms such as religion, conspiracy theory, ideology, and even belief, with an even hand? How do we deal with diffuse and dynamic movements, without institutions or fixed creeds and texts? How is narrative embedded in power, how is power created in, and exercised through, narrative, and with what consequences? Or, relating to materiality, spatiality, and lived religion: in what spaces, using, producing or destroying which material objects, and through which kind of practices? A focus on vernacular practices may further lead us to questions that fall within the purview of the cognitive science of religion: Do 'religious' and 'conspiratorial' inferences about hidden agents and powers draw on shared cognitive resources, heuristics, or biases? If so, how might embodied engagements with different material, social, and cultural situations determine how such resources are deployed to produce behaviours and cultural expressions (speech, text, violence, group formation) that sometimes get recognised as 'religious', other times 'conspiracist', and occasionally both? These questions, moreover, link up with social psychology as well as microsociology: What are the strategic or motivational aspects driving certain types of reasoning and speech?

These are all complex questions. Combining them increases that complexity, but it may also serve to highlight productive connections between disciplinary perspectives. While synthesis is neither universally desired nor reasonably to be expected, the least we can do is to bring disciplines together, side by side. This book is the first systematic attempt at doing so. We present authors from psychology, history, sociology, political science, philosophy, anthropology, and religious studies, each tackling different aspects of the relation between conspiracy theory and religion. The book also takes a more global approach, making a humble attempt at overcoming the bias in conspiracy theory research toward Euro-American data. The problem with biased data is often intertwined with the problem of disciplinary fragmentation: for example, conspiracy theories in the Islamic world are studied by Islamic Studies scholars, the conspiracy culture of contemporary spirituality falls to the NRM scholars, the study of fascism belongs to the historians, and so forth. This volume, then, attempts to create a broader, more general conversation.

2 Conceptualisation

How do we organise that conversation? Conspiracy theory and religion are both fuzzy terms for complex socio-cultural phenomena. How we relate them depends to a large extent on how we operationalise each of the terms: are we interested in 'religions' as specific social groups and movements, or as cognitive

systems, or discursive practices? Are we interested in specific conspiracy *beliefs*, *theories*, and *narratives*, or in the cognitive underpinnings of conspiratorial inferences, or the social and cultural contexts in which conspiracies are enunciated, or the motivations and functions that drive actors to claim conspiracy? We shall return to some of these complicated questions in Chapter 1, which lays down a metatheoretical framework for the volume.

At this point it suffices to note that both religion and conspiracy theory are typically seen as involving specific patterns of thought and ideas, and that both relate in complicated ways to social power. Moreover, these are typically related, so that specific social situations evoke cognitive responses. The interplay *between* religion and conspiracy theories, then, will vary with shifting relations of power. A religious group may be part of the reigning power structure in a certain region at a particular point in time, employing narratives about conspiracy in order to defend the status quo, divert critics, or define internal threats as demonic outsiders. In another region or at another point in time, that religion may be the disenfranchised out-group, stigmatised by allegations of subversive conspiracy levelled by an empowered majority.

Alternatively, a religious group may self-consciously and deliberately *cast* itself as an out-group—whether it is objectively disenfranchised or not—and launch its own counter-epistemic claims against perceived hegemony in order to claim its own space, its own power. Moreover, religions never speak with one voice, and religious activists from within the same tradition may often fight intense (mostly discursive) battles over the truth claims of specific conspiracy theories (see, for instance, Dyrendal 2003). For example, when some Nigerian Islamist activists were spreading conspiracy rumours about polio vaccines in the early 2000s, their opponents were enlisting the authority of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and established Muslim scholars to combat the conspiracy beliefs and change vaccine behaviour in a positive direction (see, for instance, Yahya 2007: 190–193).

In order to get a conceptual grip on these complexities, we want to introduce three perspectives on the relationship between religion and conspiracy theories, each highlighting different kinds of phenomena and processes: conspiracy theory *in*, *about* and *as* religion. These three relations are intended to serve a heuristic and mnemonic function for readers of the volume: They help us remember that the relationship between religiosity and conspiracism is not fixed, and, hopefully, are an inclusive and productive way of moving between the different theoretical perspectives and empirical foci of individual chapters in this book. Before we move on to present the outline of the book, let us look at what it means to consider conspiracy theories as religion, in religion(s), or about religion(s), and how these perspectives might relate to each other.

3 As Religion

Looking at conspiracy theory *as* religion implies an interest in conceptual similarities and cognitive bridges that link members of the two categories, whether on the epistemological level or in relation to psychological or cognitive faculties, or in functional terms on the social level. In other words, this perspective is interested in questions of explanation as well as of function. Are there shared cognitive, psychological, and social constraints that help explain (features of) both 'religions' and 'conspiracy theories'? Do conspiracy theories and religions provide some of the same functions, for example with regard to creating in-group identity, maintaining group cohesion, attributing evil, or providing worldviews that make issues of existential importance fathomable? Taking this approach to conspiracy theories, interest is turned primarily to the full 'package deal' that we might call *conspiracism*: that is, to worldviews permeated by conspiracy beliefs and suspicious inferences, rather than to individual conspiracist narratives or beliefs. On the religion side, this approach tends to focus on its cognitive and social dimensions: the cognitive content of religious ideation, the various social formations in which it tends to develop, its contexts, and its functions within and between groups and in societies at large.

Since the 'conspiracism as religion' approach stretches from epistemology through discourse to narrative and its social enactments, it includes psychological, philosophical, social-scientific, and cultural studies perspectives. Conspiracy theory in grand mode posits patterns and explains suffering with reference to a hidden, overwhelming power that suffuses history, leaves traces for believers to find, and drives history towards a goal. Studies may thus draw out analogous features shared by conspiracist and religious narratives, such as promiscuous teleology, providence, soteriology, theodicy, and 'revelatory' claims to higher knowledge. In the present volume, this approach is most clearly visible in chapters that explore the epistemological comparisons between monotheistic theologies and conspiratorial theories of "hidden agents" (Keeley), the psychological building blocks underlying both conspiracist and religious ideation (Wood and Douglas), and the interplay between social-psychological mechanisms and entangled historical genealogies that account for common overlaps between "esoteric" and conspiratorial hermeneutical strategies (Asprem and Dyrendal). But a conspiracism as religion angle also allows some of our authors to look at how the introduction of conspiracism into a discourse may shift it toward a 'religion-like' form. Thus, Christopher Partridge's contribution shows how conspiracism in and about the popular music scene and, above all, its rising, fading, and unexpectedly shooting stars, is involved in processes of sacralisation as well as demonisation that turn musicians alternately into gods

or devils, and relates them to broader questions of religious significance. More generally, Stef Aupers and Jaron Harambam argue that conspiracy theories can function as a form of 'secular enchantment', as they seek to shatter the 'iron cage' of modernity and repopulate the world with mysterious and powerful agents, from aliens to devil worshipers. Other chapters look at how some conspiracy theories can provide discourses that do not self-identify as 'religious' with functions that are often associated with religions, such as a theodicy, or a form of providential historiography with eschatological promises (good examples are in the chapters by Endresen and Makeeff).

4 In Religion

Looking at 'conspiracy theory *in* religion' we must conceptualise 'religions' as concrete social groups situated in particular societies. The scope of conspiracy theory in this context could cover anything from specific topical theories (for example about vaccines, the economy, or political processes) and event conspiracy theories (about specific, often traumatic, events, from natural disasters and accidents to assassinations and terrorist attacks) to broader patterns of conspiracism within a specific group. One central topic that falls under this rubric is how religious groups mobilise, debate, and negotiate specific conspiracy narratives or patterns of conspiracy beliefs in their theologies, for example in relation to ethics, politics, or history. Such uses may be systematic or *ad hoc*, tied to specific, situated, collective production and evaluation of information. In any case, the focus is on how a religious group and actors within it deploy conspiracist narratives, why they do it, to what ends, and with what results.

A common topic in the study of conspiracy narratives in religions is related to millennialism and prophecy. As described by Leon Festinger and his collaborators in *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), individuals and groups resourcefully develop strategies for reducing cognitive dissonance between their belief in a prophecy's veracity and its apparent disconfirmation in fact. In some cases, this includes claiming that the failure was due to a hitherto unidentified conspiracy working to prevent the prophesised events from occurring. In other words, conspiracism and failed prophecy can work together in mutual reinforcement. Benjamin Zeller has demonstrated this trajectory within Heaven's Gate in the years leading up to their group suicide (Zeller 2014: 205–208), and David G. Robertson argues that the same dynamic is responsible for the apparent growth of conspiracy narratives in the New Age movement during the 1990s, as the posited global transformation failed to transpire (Robertson 2013). This connection can also be seen in right-wing nationalism, in groups such as Christian

Identity in the United States (Barkun 1994), Colin Jordan's British National Party (Goodrick-Clarke 2002: 30–51), and in racially charged Nationalistic Paganism in the United States and Northern Europe (Gardell 2003). In a few cases, this pattern has contributed to a violent outcome, such as Heaven's Gate, The Peoples Temple, and Aum Shinrikyo (Repp 2005, also Tsuji, this volume); in other cases, the connection has been exaggerated (such as at Waco, where it would legitimise the ATF's siege of the Branch Davidian compound) or even fabricated.

Millennial concerns are far from the only context in which religions may develop and deploy conspiracy narratives. Grand conspiracy theories about world systems as well as about singular events tend to articulate and represent conflicts (Butter 2014: 21), whether internal to a religious movement or outside of it. Conspiratorial narratives are, for example, useful for connecting real socio-political struggles in this world to an established theology, which, for example, identifies social competition and political rivals with a cosmic foe, and legitimises one's own actions as "doing the work of good/God(s)" against the enemies of cosmic order. The blending of demonology with social reality to create conspiratorial views of opponents is particularly common to sectarian schisms and interreligious conflicts, such as during and following the Protestant reformation in Europe (the Pope as Antichrist, reformers as heretics, and Catholic priests as pagan idolaters), or in struggles between religious groups and secular states. The latter is exemplified well by the anti-government, anti-science, and anti-modernity conspiracies of the contemporary religious Right in the USA, as well as by the anti-Masonic theories that flourished after the French Revolution (see, for instance, Cubitt 1991), when anxieties that encroaching secularism would target the (Roman Catholic) church at large were growing. Indeed, influential conspiracy narratives involving Masons, Jews, and the Illuminati have their very origin as 'conspiracy theories in religions', with the original function of demonising secularist political tendencies. As we shall see, however, it is a standard feature of conspiracy narratives that they spread and adapt to new contexts.

In this volume, we find historical examples of conspiracy theories developed within religious contexts discussed in Michael Hagemeister's chapter on the Russian Orthodox context of the infamous *Protocols*, and Asprem and Dyrendal's chapter on Western esotericism and conspiracy narratives. In contemporary times, religiously based conspiracy theories often emerge in politically fraught contexts where a particular religion has become an important signifier of group identity for a whole nation, or of an ethnic or social group. In the present volume, we see this in articles about Buddhist conspiracy theories in Sri Lanka (Bretfeld) and Myanmar (Frydenlund), and Muslim conspiracy

theories in the Arabic world (Berridge, di Poli), but also Orthodox theories in Greece (Makeeff) and Russia (Hagemeister, Shnirelman).

5 About Religion

As we have hinted to above, conspiracy theories *in* religions are often also *about other* religions. Religious majority groups can draw on conspiratorial elements to demonise schismatic groups, or to target religious minorities; minorities, on their part, may demonise majority institutions as part of a cosmic conspiracy connected to metaphysical evil. The examples from Myanmar and Sri Lanka mentioned above concern Buddhist majorities backed by state power targeting Muslim minorities cast as global existential threats. Conspiracy theories about religion are, as noted by Michael Butter, usually "articulations of a certain conflict" (2014: 21). They do cultural and political work in forging identities and placing blame inside or outside the community of believers.

Such theories may, of course, also originate outside of any religious tradition, from a secular or even anti-religious position. Moreover, narratives about the conspiratorial aims of specific religious groups may start in a specific environment only to spread outside it and adapt to suit new goals in new contexts. Such theories almost invariably focus on a specific religious group rather than religion in general, although sometimes the group in question is itself imaginary ('Satanists', for example). The religion typically functions as a group marker that is used to define, through the medium of the conspiracy theory, the outsider as an enemy.

The paradigmatic example is the claim of a Jewish plot to take over the world, as presented in the infamous forgery, *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. While its origins draw on Orthodox millennialism, as mentioned above, it has had its most violent uses in secular ideological contexts, most notably the Third Reich, and continues to have influence among far-right groups in the USA and Europe, as well as in secular and religious contexts in the Middle East. In less obvious examples, we see much the same dynamic at work in the development of witchcraft discourses in sub-Saharan Africa, or the Satanic Ritual Abuse panic of the 1980s and 1990s, when it was widely believed that a large, organised network of 'Satanists' were systematically abusing children as part of ritual observance (Robertson 2016: 86–88). The Satanism of these claims had little, if anything, to do with any identifiable religious groups, but were rather evoked from the demonological imagination.

At certain times and places, conspiracy narratives have particularly targeted New Religious Movements (NRMs). Partly, this relates to the changing position

of religious institutions in secularising societies: as the churches have declined, their representatives, religiously conservative governments, and media outlets reacted by inordinately demonising NRMs as dangerous and subversive 'cults'. In recent times, accusations of physical and sexual abuse, sexual deviance, espionage, and 'brainwashing' have been common in portrayals of NRMs by Western media and enforcement agencies, acts that are seen as transgressing the norms of the majority, and in the process provoking revulsion and fascination in equal measure (Palmer 2004: 65, 71; Doherty 2014: 50). This, however, is not an exclusively Western phenomenon: Helen Farley's contribution to this volume, for example, demonstrates how Chinese state actors promoted conspiracy theories about the Falun Gong movement, which in turn reciprocated with conspiracy theories about the Chinese state.

The notion of 'Islamisation' now functions in a similar way to how anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives have done in the past, as a nativist subversion narrative that localises a nefarious threat against 'culture', 'values', and 'identity', often cast in ideological rather than religious terms, and usually racialised in practice. At least in Europe, where the so-called Eurabia theory (Ye'or 2005) is the most explicitly conspiracist elaboration of anti-Muslim sentiments, these narratives are often enunciated from a secular standpoint, even to the extent of casting the threat of Islam as a species of a broader threat of resurgent 'religion' against the Enlightenment values of secularism, reason, democracy, and liberty. The so-called New Atheism is one factor in the popularisation of this link in the global West, but it is primarily its rhetorical weaponisation at the fringes of parliamentary politics that has made it a potent specimen of conspiracism about religion in Europe over the past decade.

6 Contents of the Volume

The volume is divided into three parts: *Explanations*, *Correspondences*, and *Locations*. Articles in Part 1 present explanatory approaches from different disciplines; Part 2 focuses on analogies between religion and conspiracy theories; while Part 3 includes a range of case studies of relationships between religion and conspiracy theories in a variety of different local contexts. Readers unfamiliar with research in the field may want to look at some contributions in Part 2 or Part 3 before perusing the more theory-laden chapters of Part 1.

6.1 *Part 1: Explanations*

Part 1 presents chapters that exemplify how a range of different academic disciplines approach conspiracy theories in relation to religion. The first chapter

is written by the editors, and is intended to serve as a meta-theoretical primer for the volume at large. It starts by acknowledging the serious issue with definitions, which is made more complicated by the interdisciplinary nature of the volume. It argues that the most constructive way to resolve these issues is not by picking a side or stipulating new definitions of 'religion' and 'conspiracy theory', but rather to take a building-block approach that tolerates definitional pluralism while focusing attention on the pool of elements (cognitive, social, material, discursive) that various definitions deploy. After introducing this framework, the chapter presents a brief overview of the main research traditions focusing on conspiracy theories, highlighting important previous research and identifying key areas of further interest. The chapter also discusses the significance of conspiracy theories in the study of religion in more depth, highlighting previous studies and theoretical issues, setting the stage for the chapters that follow.

In the first of the discipline-based chapters, Stef Aupers and Jaron Harambam focus on sociological approaches to the study of religion and conspiracism. Rather than simply summarising previous work, however, they build upon Popper's observation of conspiracy theories as a secular replacement for the religious impulse by showing how sociological theory is tangled up with conspiracist thought in complex ways. The first part of the chapter discusses the tendency for the social sciences to pathologise conspiracy narratives, and argues that this is essentially a form of boundary maintenance. Focusing on critical theory in particular, the authors argue that contemporary sociological theory and the logic of conspiracy theories are remarkably similar in their radical scepticism and epistemological grounding in social constructivism. The second part draws on fieldwork carried out in the Netherlands, which is used to argue that conspiracy theories emerge from the intersection of social science, scepticism, and religious impulses.

The following two chapters consider the idea of conspiracism *as* religion, although from different angles. From the perspective of philosophy, Brian Keeley addresses epistemological similarities between conspiratorial and religious explanatory frameworks, specifically focusing on claims about unseen forces behind events. His guiding question is given by the title of the chapter: "Is a Belief in Providence the Same as a Belief in Conspiracy?" Keeley also begins to challenge the assumption that there is something intrinsically and essentially wrong or pathological with conspiracy theorising considered as a mode of explanation—an assumption that is challenged from a number of positions in the chapters in this first section of the volume. Keeley concludes that the similarities are rooted in the need for frameworks that overcome challenges that other frameworks, such as scientific explanations, cannot address.

In their chapter, Michael Wood and Karen Douglas approach the same subject as Keeley from a social psychological perspective. They consider cognitive mechanisms that religious and conspiratorial thinking might both rely on, including *patternicity* (a tendency to seek order in any data, even random) and *agenticity* (seeing an organising intelligence behind the pattern), *compensatory control* (where an individual makes up for a perceived lack of control in their own environment by affirming it elsewhere—a god, for instance, or the Illuminati), and *probabilistic reasoning* (through which an individual assesses whether events are coincidental or are linked causally). However, they also note where conspiracism and religious ideation seem to diverge—in their views on whether the world is fundamentally just or unjust, and in their social dimensions. So while conspiracism and religious ideation share interesting psychological parallels, they are not identical.

Also using predominantly social-psychological data, Joseph Uscinski, Darin DeWitt, and Matthew Atkinson's chapter interrogates taken-for-granted assumptions that blame the Internet for the current popularity of conspiracy theories. The Internet is commonly charged with allowing conspiratorial ideas to travel faster and farther than in previous eras, making people more likely to seek out and adopt conspiracy beliefs. The authors conclude that, in fact, there is little to suggest that the world is more conspiratorial now than it was prior to the development of the Internet, or that the processes that keep people from believing in conspiracy theories have changed. This is an important observation, not only because it brings into question other received wisdom about conspiracy theories, but because it highlights that issues of power and legitimacy underlie the category. Where information is sourced from, who produces it, and who consumes it are just as relevant as the contents of the conspiracy beliefs in question.

6.2 *Part 2: Correspondences*

In Part 2, various theoretical approaches are used to make and to interrogate connections and areas of common concern ("correspondences") between religion and conspiracy theories.

Nicky Falkof looks at a local variant of the 'Satanic conspiracy' notion that spread across the Western world in the 1980s and 1990s (see Richardson *et al.* 1991). The term covers a set of broadly related narratives about dangerous Satanic conspiracy. It included explicitly religious narratives where demonic forces—'the occult' and 'Satanic'—were seen to be acting through secular culture, particularly against children and adolescents, but the focus was always on the alleged harms to society. The conspiracy narratives bridged social problems discourse from multiple sources, presenting worries over anything from popular culture to serious crime as part of explicitly Satanic cultural and political

subversive activities to harm society. At times these different fears melded together and created (mostly local) panics, even drawing in law enforcement, government, and academia. Narratives of Satanic conspiracy spread through professional and religious networks throughout the world, with each region and set of actors shaping them and reactions differently. All of this is included in Falkof's analysis, which looks specifically at South Africa. She traces the different actors and narratives that drove the South African panic, with a sensitive eye both for the contexts in which the narratives made sense and their social consequences: the scare can be seen as both an expression of disenfranchisement and uncertainty from the white population, and a transferal of otherness along religious rather than racial or ethnic lines.

The role of 'stigmatised knowledge' in marginal groups is the focus of the chapter by Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Suzanne Newcombe. As knowledge is socialised, the relative capital and social demographics of different ideas—conspiratorial or otherwise—can tell us much about the social construction of meaning. That "[t]ruth and facts can become a relational position based on ideology and loyalty in the case of many subcultural groups" is demonstrated through ethnographies of the Bilderberg Fringe Festival/Protest of 2013 and the 2014–15 protests against the Dalai Lama by the International Shugden Community.

Christopher Partridge's chapter explores what several different conspiracy narratives concerning popular musicians tell us about conspiracism's role in constructing certain ideas as 'sacred' or 'special' in the contemporary West. Popular music is transgressive, and therefore "operates across the boundaries that separate the sacred and the profane," Partridge argues. The chapter is also a useful case study in the interplay between exogenous conspiracy theories (that is, conspiracy theories constructed about a certain group or individuals by outsiders) and endogenous (those constructed by the group in question themselves). In addition, his chapter is important in establishing some of the importance of popular culture in understanding conspiracism.

Asprem and Dyrendal discuss the relationship between conspiracism and what is often referred to as Western esotericism, asking, as the title suggests, whether and in what sense the two can be considered 'close companions'. They combine historical consideration with sociological and psychological ones to argue that the history of esotericism as a kind of 'rejected' or 'stigmatised knowledge' has provided key conspiratorial narratives and played a central role in shaping the 'alternative' religious landscape in which much of so-called conspirituality is developed. Moreover, the chapter argues that a preference for esoteric hermeneutical strategies, subversive knowledge, paranormal experiences, and gnosis makes the resulting 'cultic milieu' more likely

to attract people of a certain psychological profile, but also creates motivational pressures that steer the reasoning and discursive expressions of those already engaged in the milieu toward conspiracism, especially in the face of outside criticism and perceived institutional threats.

David G. Robertson then examines how authority is established and maintained in the non-institutionalised countercultural milieu of millennial conspiracism, where appeals to individualism are ubiquitous, institutionalised power is shunned and suspicion is paramount. Focusing on two significant conspiracist spokespersons, British writer and presenter David Icke and US radio host Alex Jones, he shows how they can be seen to exhibit the typical traits of Weber's charismatic figure. He argues that a model of authority based upon *epistemic capital*, in which the leader is seen as demonstrating the very thing that their subscribers consider to be repressed by the controlling authorities, may provide a better understanding of the power dynamics of conspiracism, and the role of charismatic spokespersons within it. Indeed, this common organisational model suggests another way in which conspiracism and religious narratives are interrelated.

6.3 *Part 3: Locations*

The volume makes a modest attempt at redressing the Western-centric view of extant work on conspiracy theories by taking a global scope. Part 3 is where this ambition comes to the fore, bringing in case studies from different countries and cultures around the world, and involving a broader range of relationships between religions, states, and political situations.

Sven Bretfeld's chapter discusses the role of conspiracy theories in Sri Lanka in the discursive construction of a 'pure' Buddhist state. The narrative of a subversive Islamic plot to take over the country legitimises and encourages violence against Muslims so as to defend the timeless teachings of the Buddha. Modern nationalist discourses are thereby transformed into new versions of a popular mythical narrative.

Following on this underexplored theme, Iselin Frydenlund's chapter on 'Buddhist Islamophobia' focuses on Myanmar, where violent attacks on the Muslim minority have significantly increased since 2012, encouraged by factions of Buddhist monks. The attacks reached a new height in 2017 with reports of systematic atrocities, including massacres, committed against the Muslim Rohingya minority, forcing more than half a million to flee the country. Frydenlund argues that the sudden growth of anti-Muslim conspiracy theories that makes up a part of the background, is in fact a result of an outward-looking and global perspective, rather than the ethnic nationalism of the immediate post-colonial period.

Willow J. Berridge gives an overview of the function of conspiracism in the Islamic world, seeking to move away from the pathologising model and instead seeing conspiracism as feeding off a distinctive post-colonial split between state and society. With this broader context in place, Barbara De Poli's contribution continues to dig deeper into the specifics of anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic conspiracism in the Arab world. Although a Western import, it has become highly visible since the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948. De Poli argues that the popularity of such theories are problematic not primarily because they are incorrect, but rather because they obscure the exposure of real conspiracies and corruptions of power endemic to the region.

Alternative versions of the ancient past are a mainstay of conspiracy lore (Dyrendal 2013). Revelations about a hidden, grand past can be a particularly invaluable resource when conspiracy lore takes on a nationalist bent. Endresen's and Makeeff's chapters give extensive examples of how esoteric, nationalist, alternative historiographies are employed in their specific contexts.

Cecilie Endresen takes us to the Balkans, and a particular conspiracy theory found in Albania, one of the most secularised and religiously heterogeneous states in contemporary Europe. The so-called Pelasgian narrative identifies Albania as the cradle of European civilisation, and identifies a plot to deny Albania its rightful place in Europe, the world, and even the cosmos. The chapter focuses upon the practical function of these narratives: as Endresen concludes, they "turn one of the poorest and most powerless populations in Europe into the masters of the universe."

"Was Aristotle an Anti-Semitic Alien?" asks Tao Thykier Makeeff as he takes us to Greece and the conspiracy narrative of the Epsilon Team, an alleged secret society with origins in ancient Greece and outer space. The Epsilon Team is an example of a 'positive' conspiracy theory: a band of superheroes of Greek cultural history (including Aristotle and Alexander the Great), watching over the nation's fortunes from an exalted place in the skies, and intervening with awesome technology and scientific knowledge at moments of providential significance. Similar to the Pelasgian theory in Albania, the Epsilon narrative is designed to square current travesties with notions of past greatness. Makeeff demonstrates that in addition to obvious connections with UFO lore and ancient astronaut theories, epsilonism's basic ideas have developed from and absorbed elements of anti-Semitic theories of domination by foreign interests, on the one hand, and traditional Orthodox beliefs about a 'Secret School' of devout teachers, on the other, preserving Greek culture.

Tsuji Ryutaro considers "The Role of Conspiracy Theory in the Aum Shinrikyo Incident." The new religious movement Aum Shinrikyo became infamous for the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo metro system in 1994, and has been found

responsible for a number of other crimes, including assassinations and manufacture and possession of chemical and biological weapons. Based on a close examination of the group's internal publications, especially focusing on the development of leader Asahara Shoko and his teachings, Tsuji demonstrates how increasing tension with society was expressed through the adoption of conspiratorial narratives that were gaining wide currency in Japan at the time. The chapter thus highlights three features of general import to this volume: (1) the role of conspiracism in reducing cognitive dissonance, bolstering in-group identity, and localising 'evil' in social reality; (2) the *ordinariness* of the specific conspiracy narratives that may serve as resources in such processes; and (3) the glocalisation of specific conspiracy narratives as they are imported from one country into another (in this case, from US right-wing circles to Japanese left-wing circles) and adapted to 'explain' local circumstances.

The chapter by Turkay Nefes explores the conspiratorial rhetoric about the Dönmes in Turkey, a secretive Jewish group that is outwardly Muslim but continues to hold a seventeenth century Rabbi to be the Jewish messiah. Nefes uses a frame analysis of the popular *Efendi* novels to show how the Dönmes have been accused by various groups of being local agents for a global conspiracy responsible for Turkey's economic woes. Of particular interest is the observation that the books were initially supported by a number of Muslim organisations, but this ceased when later books accused them of having been infiltrated by the Dönmes. The chapter also places these Dönmes speculations in the context of a broader Turkish conspiracy culture, fuelled by a history of less than transparent politics.

Michael Hagemeister's chapter takes us to post-Soviet Russia, focusing on apocalyptic conspiracist narratives that pit "The Third Rome against the Third Temple." As the title suggests, Russian conspiracy culture is deeply infused with Russian Orthodoxy, and in particular with eschatological views that give Moscow (the 'Third Rome', after Constantinople) a central role in the salvation history of the world. This background is particularly evident in recent interpretations and uses of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion.* Hagemeister traces the Orthodox, apocalyptic, and millennialist readings of the *Protocols* through the seminal religious writer Sergei Nilus (1862–1929), showing how Nilus' interpretations have helped shape a resurgence of Orthodox, nationalist, anti-modern, anti-Western, and anti-Semitic conspiracism in Russia in recent decades.

The chapter by Victor Shnirelman continues the focus on Russia by considering the interrelation of eschatology, conspiracism, and nationalism in the work of the popular political writer, Alexander Dugin. Through the 1990s, inspired by an apocalyptic reading of René Guénon's traditionalism, Dugin constructed an apocalyptic mythology in which Russia was the Millennial Kingdom and

history an occult war between Christianity and Judaism. Latterly, the cast of protagonists and antagonists has been switched to Russia versus America. As Shnirelman argues, the lack of any attempt in reconciling these two versions of the narratives is typical of Dugin's far from consistent work.

Paul Jackson considers right-wing extremist networks as parts of a broader cultic milieu of stigmatised knowledge—including matters of political and religious opinion—in order to theorise its role in developing and spreading conspiracist narratives. The chapter explores how British and American neo-Nazi cultures from the 1960s to the 1990s have reconfigured elements of Hitler's own story of hidden Jewish conspiracies to construct their own variants of neo-Nazism. Jackson uses the metaphor of a fungi—on the surface appearing as separate entities, yet connected by mycorrhizal networks to share nutrients—to analyse a milieu interconnected geographically and over time, while also recognising cultural specificity and difference.

Falun Gong was banned by the government of the People's Republic of China in 1999. Helen Farley's chapter looks at a number of conspiracy theories that emerged in the years that followed, proffered by both sides of the debate, each making an impassioned plea to a Western audience in order to legitimise their actions. The chapter also features a brief account of Farley's unwitting participation as an actor in one such conspiracy.

Carole Cusack's chapter concerns The Church of the SubGenius (COSG), founded in 1979 by Ivan Stang and Philo Drummond. It is often dismissed as a 'parody religion', yet COSG teachings offer a sophisticated critique of Western values focused on the all-pervasiveness of consumerism, which dooms one to a life of conformist wage-slavery. Drawing on Guy Debord's contention that the capitalist spectacle has replaced the religious worldview, rendering everyday life mysterious and the acquisition of goods compulsive, Cusack argues that, when stripped of science fiction tropes (Yetis, extraterrestrials, and the like), the COSG vision of a world in the grip of a totalitarian materialist conspiracy is largely realistic. COSG relentlessly parodies the corporate Church of Scientology and materialistic Pentecostal megachurches; J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, the pipe-smoking salesman messiah based (at least partly) on L. Ron Hubbard, can sell anything and COSG members are urged to "buy SubGenius." To abandon work, reject the materialist conspiracy, and become enSlackened is a spiritual goal that may be read 'straight'; yet "Bob" resists being read 'straight'. As well as reflecting on the significance of conspiracy narratives in 'invented religions', this chapter brings into question notions of the primacy of sincerity in conspiracy beliefs.

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The volume concludes with a brief afterword by the editors, assessing how well the research questions identified in Chapter 1 have been addressed and suggesting some directions for future research. It is our hope that the chapters of this book will not only serve as useful points of reference to specialists who want to know more about specific cases, but more importantly that reading the chapters together can bring to light connections that would otherwise go unnoticed. Again, both the interdisciplinary and the cross-cultural character of the contributory volume are important in this regard. In terms of interdisciplinarity, we hope the chapters will demonstrate what scholars of religious studies can offer the study of conspiracy theories, on the one hand, and what explanatory theories from the behavioural and social sciences have to offer the study of religion when it deals with boundary-defying topics such as this, on the other. But it is the broader geographical and cross-cultural scope that we think should be of greatest immediate interest both to those studying conspiracy theory in general, and to scholars of religion with an interest in this topic. By taking a global approach and juxtaposing cases from different countries, cultures, and social contexts, we hope that the volume will demonstrate that conspiracism is a global phenomenon, that its particular expression is highly dependent on social circumstances, and that it is the instrument of the powerful as well as the disenfranchised. We also hope to demonstrate that, in terms of religion, the data does not permit any simple correlation between the two, although we often see connections when religion is politicised, or politics religionised, and especially when religion becomes tied to questions of identity and autonomy. These common features are found in contexts as different as North America, South Asia, and Russia, and with religions as different as Buddhism, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam.

Finally, the global approach adopted here starts to shed light on how specific conspiratorial narratives travel cross-culturally. Several of our chapters demonstrate the phenomenon of the globalisation and glocalisation of conspiracist literature. For example, the anti-Masonic and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that developed in Roman Catholic France two hundred years ago have been rebranded by the anti-federal and anti-globalist "New World Order" theories of American right-wing circles, and have since been imported as far afield as Turkey and Japan, where they find new local uses and adaptations. The Satanism scare, partly a creation of American Evangelicals, developed into a global pandemic that reached South Africa, where it mutated in response to a new environment where racialised social divides created a new spin. Studying such processes of transmission and adaptation, which necessarily invoke the causal role of sociocultural contexts that provide different strategic situations

and bounded rationalities for religious and conspiracist actors, may prove one of the most significant opportunities for further scholarship opened up by the approach championed in this book.

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PART 1

Explanations

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CHAPTER 1

Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Religion(s): What We are Talking about, and Why it is Important

Asbjørn Dyrendal, Egil Asprem and David G. Robertson

> We start our lives in chaos, in babble. As we surge up into the world, we try to devise a shape, a plan. There is dignity in this. Your whole life is a plot, a scheme, a diagram. It is a failed scheme but that's not the point.
>
> DON DELILLO, *White Noise, p. 291*

1 Two Fuzzy Terms

The study of conspiracy theory and religion faces its first challenge in delineating the meaning of the terms. In the case of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith famously characterised the situation like this:

> While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious, there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy.
>
> SMITH 1982: XI

'Conspiracy theory' is in a similar situation. People theorise conspiracies all the time, yet what gets counted in which discourse depends wholly on our "imaginative acts of comparison and generalization." Neither are, however, inescapably tied to the academy. 'Religion' has served in many, often polemical, capacities for centuries (see, for instance, Lopez 2009). The use of 'conspiracy theory' can be traced at least to the second half of the nineteenth century, but it did not truly enter academic use until Karl Popper seized upon it in 1948 (Sapountzis and Condor 2013). From the 1960s, however, its use has escalated.

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Analysis and polemics have often gone together, with increasing diversity in the use and definitions of the concept as more voices joined. Religion and conspiracy theory are thus both contested concepts, used in highly specialised academic discourses that stress different sides of, or questions pertaining to, the complexes of behaviour that the concepts may refer to. Both terms are *also* rich with vernacular meanings that infuse public and academic discourse alike; politics and analytics intertwine.

The challenge is to clarify both 'religion' and 'conspiracy theory' under such conditions. This opening chapter will draw a road map to the different approaches, while providing an overview of previous research and highlighting areas of further interest. The interdisciplinary nature of the handbook, combining disciplinary perspectives working with different definitions and assumptions further complicates the challenge. Philosophers who analyse the terms may emphasise their 'belief' dimension, but mean something completely different by 'belief' to a psychologist. Both may be showing only remote interest in the social interactions that would interest a religious studies scholar or an anthropologist. Within a single discipline, such as anthropology, cognitive and cultural anthropology can vary hugely in data selection and analysis, while using the same concepts to frame their research.

The issue is complicated further by the entanglement of both religion and conspiracy theory with real-world power. Neither term is neutral, nor are they merely descriptive. Both involve judgments about the acceptability of certain ideas within the social sphere, often couched in language of 'rationality' or 'extremism'. Power talks: political and legal judgments may separate the 'religion' from the 'cult', and the (false) conspiracy theory from the (real) conspiracy. The 'cult member' rarely has the power to challenge the status of their group, but the state has the power to define, to stigmatise, arrest, and in certain cases even kill the members. Conspiracy theory tends to be a judgment mostly used against outsiders and the less powerful; similar narratives with equal epistemic status are less likely to be considered conspiracy theory when promoted by authorities. Nevertheless, the state that criticises the irrationality of critics' conspiracy theories may promote similar theories, dismiss qualms about evidence, construct the term as insult, and jail critics.

2 Constructs and Building Blocks: Navigating the Definitional Quagmire

Both of our key terms are defined in a myriad of ways. Two key factors determine how they are defined: (1) the research interests of specific academic disciplines; and (2) the 'folk' understandings and strategic agendas employed by social

actors. These two factors—the disciplinary and the strategic—interact, since academics, too, are social actors, entangled in the agendas of disciplinary formations and, often enough, in broader socio-political interests. While scholars must recognise both of these issues, this chapter will focus on the first. Research on religion and conspiracy theory draws on a large number of disciplines, with researchers sharing different assumptions and research goals, and often attaching different meanings to key terms. How do we navigate this challenge?

The two most common ways to deal with this problem is to either side with some existing position, or stipulate one's way out by proposing new working definitions. An alternative way out, which we will sketch here, is to take a *building-block approach* (see Taves 2009; Taves 2015). Following Ann Taves' suggestion, terms such as religion and conspiracy theory may be construed as *complex cultural concepts* (Taves 2015), that is, "abstract nouns with unstable, overlapping, culturally determined meanings that vary within and across [social] formations" (Asprem 2016a: 160). While they do not allow for concise definitions, it is possible to disassemble such concepts into a pool of simpler building blocks, on the level of human behaviour and cognition, which individual definitions tend to draw upon and cluster around. Identifying these generic and basic elements can be quite helpful for creating clarity across a bounded set of phenomena that disciplinary traditions will tend to categorise and explain in different terms.

We are not going for a full reverse engineering of conspiracy theory here; instead, our use of building blocks is more heuristic. We are retaining the broad "complex cultural concepts" in order to carve out a loosely structured field with fuzzy boundaries, while seeking to highlight the more fine-grained analytical concepts that different authors and research traditions operationalise in practice. In other words, we offer a disciplinary overview where potential links between the disciplines will be highlighted through the building blocks of human behaviour that feed into both religion and conspiracy theories as conceptualised by the disciplines. The goal is to help the reader navigate, present some of the building blocks that different approaches emphasise, and show how these pertain to the study of conspiracy theory and religion. But first, what does a building-block approach do? The case of religion can serve as an illustration.

3 The Example of 'Religion'

The discipline of religious studies includes a number of scholarly traditions that conceptualise the object of study quite differently. Some talk about "belief in spiritual beings" (from Tylor 1958), others focus on setting things apart as

"sacred" (from Durkheim 1971 [1912]), while yet others pick out a notion of "values" and "ultimate concern" (from Tillich 1957). None of these definitions provide necessary and sufficient criteria for 'what religion *is*'; nevertheless, as Taves argues, each one points to generic processes that are typically involved in phenomena considered religious as well as in other religion-like phenomena. Thus, Taves derives three core processes from these discussions: "setting things apart" is rooted in *perceiving salience*, which has both an evolved and a learned component; "ultimate concern" arises from the capacity to *appraise significance*, which is as much about assigning categories as assessing values; while "believing in spiritual beings" relies on capacities for *imagining hypotheticals*, both in the sense of inventing novel concepts and of entering pretend worlds (Taves 2015: 202–203). In isolation, each of these are observable human behaviours that make it possible to relate a range of underlying perceptual and cognitive processes (for instance, salience, appraisal, imagination) to large-scale cultural productions (institutions focused on interactions with "gods"), and, importantly, to trace their emergence through small-scale social interactions (compare Taves 2016). In this sense, they are building blocks relative to the concept that the scholar is interested in analysing and explaining (in this case, religion).

Breaking down definitional traditions like this allows Taves to shift between the level of the cultural 'wholes' that people might categorise as religious, on the one hand, and a whole range of basic psychological, cognitive, and social processes related to conceptualisation, categorisation, perception, imagination, and meaning-making, on the other. The category of religion itself does not apply on the basic building-block level; these core processes are at work across a much broader range of human (and non-human) behaviours, including many that are not typically considered religious at all. Instead, this exercise brings into focus the cognitive capacities that combine in dynamic ways to produce specific cultural outcomes (Taves 2015: 202–208). Put differently: While the complex cultural concepts (CCCs) are governed by the full range of discursive constraints, power relations, and strategic interests, and therefore always remain fuzzy and overlapping, the myriad processes on the level of actions, cognitions, events, affects, and representations that occasionally are taken as 'evidence of' a ccc remain fairly stable. This building-block approach makes it possible to compare and relate different complex cultural concepts to each other on the level of these more stable and more precisely defined phenomena.

4 'Conspiracy Theory' among Researchers

At face value, conspiracy theory should be an easier case than religion. Reducing the components of 'conspiracy theory' to its simplest and most common

denominators, it refers to a single observable behaviour: that of narrating a story about conspiracy. However, this behaviour may be displayed for a number of different reasons, which connect contexts with underlying cognition in complex ways. On the cognitive level, narrating conspiracy *might* simply be the product of having the cause of some situation or event attributed to the intentional actions of hidden agents. In that case, it would be a simple report of how the world, or some event, seems to the narrator. But most often, this is not the case. The narrative might, for example, simply be passed on from some other source, like a salacious rumour, or it might have been deliberately invented for the sake of causing some effect in an intended audience: sowing confusion, attributing blame, obscuring the facts, dividing to rule, etc. In other words, it is just as important to look at the motivations for narrating conspiracy, the dispositions of the receiving audience that hears or reads the conspiracy narrative, and, not least, the broader sociocultural context in which the behaviour takes place.

So, the apparent simplicity of the behaviour of postulating a conspiracy evaporates as soon as we start looking at how such behaviours ought to be explained. This is in part due to how the behaviour is connected to other building blocks, such as narrators' motivations, receivers' dispositions, or their perception of events. However, explanations provided by various academic disciplines and schools are also embedded in socio-political contexts; appreciating the different explanatory contexts is therefore important for understanding how the concept of conspiracy theory is used in practice. In the literature, the common behaviour of postulating a conspiracy—which, in its simplest shape requires nothing more than the claim that persons x and y covertly agree to do action a—does not quite constitute a necessary, and certainly not a sufficient, condition for labelling something a conspiracy theory. Instead, the most influential usages of conspiracy theory focus on recurring content, stylistic elements, and epistemic qualities. The theory that your colleagues are conspiring to deny you a promotion is, on its own, unlikely to be labelled a conspiracy theory. If the narrative requires the conspiring agents to have god-like abilities to produce effects in the world, while leaving behind obscure traces that only the narrator can decipher, it is certainly more likely to be viewed as conspiracy theory than if it is built on forensic evidence and presented as a hypothetically plausible, and empirically testable, chain of events.

Context also plays an important, but not always specified, role in judging as conspiracy theory the narration of conspiracy. For example, if the conspiracy is presented as the counter-narrative to some officially sanctioned view of events, it is more likely to be considered conspiracy theory than when the narrative of conspiracy is the officially sanctioned version. Moreover, at the level of cognition, the central academic interest is not the mere attribution of secret

intentions behind some event, but something approaching a general preference for seeing (hidden) intentions as causes of events—exemplified by political scientist Michael Barkun's separation of the singular "conspiracy belief" from the *Weltanschauung* of "conspiracism" (2003: 3). The relevant psychological research is thus, partially, about the disassembly of 'conspiracy theory' into something that resembles basic psychological components: which specific capacities and proclivities are involved in narrating and (over-)attributing conspiracy? When moving 'upwards' to explain and interpret patterns of real-world behaviour, analyses of contexts and functions for the behaviour and cognitions become vital. Preconceptions about epistemic status, contexts, and functions are tacitly built into academic and folk conceptualisations alike, which means that research programs are shaped in part by these (often unexamined) ideas. Appreciating the contexts and functions of conspiracy-related behaviours and cognitions are, in other words, vital to understanding conspiracy theory as an academic construct as well as grasping some of the polemics within and between research communities (see, for instance, Dieguez *et al.* 2016).

So what do scholars mean when they say "conspiracy theory"? What phenomena are they interested in? Browsing the conspiracy theory literature will show that a number of different constructions are employed, apparently singling out slightly different phenomena, such as conspiracy suspicion, conspiracy culture, conspiracy dimension, conspiracy talk, conspiracy mentality, conspiratorial predisposition, conspiracism, conspiracy belief, conspiratology, conspiracy panic, conspiracy narrative, and conspiracy stereotype. To these are added multiple other, related terms, such as 'the paranoid style', 'witch-hunt', 'counterknowledge', 'scapegoating', or 'Othering'. As mentioned above, these constructions are tied to cultural products, user groups, circumstances, trustworthiness, and a host of other factors. For our purposes here, we argue that all of these cluster around a basic, behavioural description of conspiracy theories as narratives, tied to 'special' (in the sense of sticking out and set aside) claims to knowledge about hidden power and agency (compare Asprem 2016a). In what follows, we will examine how this minimum delimitation of the content domain of conspiracy theory research is handled, analysed, and explained by different disciplines. We are organising this discussion in two movements. First, we suggest that the two elements of 'knowledge' and 'narrative' in the formulation above represent the main levels at which researchers have been engaging the field: that is, either with the content, status, or features of its knowledge claims, or with the context, functions, and motivations for narrating such claims. The two elements of power and agency will be discussed in relation to both narration and claiming knowledge. Second, we move

to discussing the study of conspiracy theory from the perspective of religious studies, foregrounding the narrative level and making connections with building blocks studied by other disciplines.

5 Conspiracy Theory as Knowledge

Most researchers tend to focus on describing and explaining the content of the conspiratorial claim: What and who is the knowledge about, and what are the characteristics (epistemic, cognitive, or social) of the knowledge claim? How is the claim justified? What 'special' (that is, anomalous, deficient, even pathological) way of thinking might be behind it? What is the social status of the claim?

These issues tend to be bundled. Starting with content, conspiracy theories are typically presented as claims about some hidden, secret power presented as the cause of specific events or situations. Since the conspiratorial cause is allegedly hidden, it may be difficult to justify the claim through normally recognised standards of evidence, prompting questions about epistemology ("is this alleged knowledge constructed in a reliable manner?"). Since the specific arguments and their underlying "emic epistemologies" (see Hammer 2001: 42–43) may therefore tend to look peculiar from the vantage point of academia (or indeed common sense), researchers may suspect that they build on special (that is, unusual, pathological, or at least stigmatised) ways of thinking. In terms of how the knowledge-claims are situated, they are typically presented as marginalised and rejected ("stigmatized knowledge-claims" [Barkun 2003]), or as belonging to specific social groups ("conspiracy theories are for losers" [Uscinski and Parent 2014]).

Different academic communities stress different aspects of this cluster, and research questions tend to vary. Some (for instance sociologists, political scientists) are more interested in the situatedness and function/purpose of the knowledge claims, while others (psychologists, philosophers) are more interested in ways of thinking. However, all dimensions are frequently part of the concept. To take just one example, Uscinski and Parent's *American Conspiracy Theories* starts from a substantial definition of content (2014: 32), before placing conspiracy theories socially as not (yet) confirmed by "properly constituted epistemic authorities" (33). *Epistemic* qualities are also addressed, for instance as "post hoc ways to avoid refutation," or as "immunizing strategies" (40, 37–53) among those who tend to view most things as caused by conspiracies—which Uscinski and Parent calls being high in the "conspiracy dimension" (14–15). Thus, epistemic quality is partially linked to "special ways of thinking," which

in turn is related to the social and historical contexts that activates conspiracy thinking among different groups.

It has frequently been noted that conspiracy talk serves to present counter-narratives in marginal groups, reflecting and expressing experiences of subjugation. This has led those researching conspiracy theory at the sociocultural level to focus on less powerful actors, and on marginalisation as a central process in the chain of causation.

The latter includes the marginalisation of knowledge-claims. Conspiracy theory becomes a label used in a process of subjugation. As noted by media studies scholar Jack Bratich (2008), conspiracy theory is a term related to social problems discourse. Moreover, the concept presents a vaguely defined form of thought and argumentation as a problem, defining it out of relevance as being irrational, anti-scientific, a form of denial, etc. Conspiracy theory thus becomes a category of exclusion from the field of knowledge, a meta-concept "signifying struggles over meaning" (Bratich 2008: 6), not a neutral concept pointing to a specific type of narrative. The relevant context of conspiracy theory from this perspective is that which gives it its status (19): a normative discourse on rationality and (reasonable) dissent, and the institutions and political actors that have constructed conspiracy thinking as a problem. This is what Bratich terms "conspiracy panic," and such an analysis suggests that the issues are akin to the ongoing battle to define science following the "pseudoscience wars" of the 1960s (Gordin 2012).

Bratich castigates "panic discourse" as centred on finding out what is behind conspiracy beliefs,[1] and notes that most analysts focus on the "conditions of emergence" for a conspiracy belief as the most important explanatory factor (2008: 18). This is, however, also true for investigations building on theoretical foundations similar to Bratich's own: in some examples of comparative historical analysis (and discourse theory), the expression of underlying conflict is a root cause (see, for instance, Butter 2014). While conspiracy theories as narrative "explain the past … predict the future … [and] deduce motives" (Bratich 2008: 13), they are caused by social tensions and are articulations of "struggles for hegemony" (19).

Struggles over power, meaning, and signification become central contexts for both the activity of theorising conspiracy and for conceptualising conspiracy theory. However, for Bratich, there is no interesting 'thing' there with regard to conspiracy beliefs: 'It' is a floating signifier that does not refer to any stable phenomenon, and hence cannot be defined substantially. All 'lower-level'

1 The alternative would be taking a conspiracy narrative as plausible enough to engage in critical dialogue.

building blocks are bracketed out, and what is left is the conceptualisation of conspiracy theory as a political practice, construed by those who want to subjugate the indefinable counterknowledge they produce by their exclusionary practices. From our perspective, however, this concept of conspiracy theory is implicitly built on a different set of building blocks, namely the interests, norms, and positions pressed by 'conspiracy panic' promoters.

A similar interest in power, meaning, and signification, read through some of the same theoretical apparatus may, however, lend itself to different judgments about the possibility and desirability of delineating conspiracy theory as a phenomenon in its own right, independent of a practice of political subjugation. The Americanist and scholar of American conspiracy culture, Michael Butter, who also draws on discourse theory, constitutes conspiracy theory as dubious, distorted presentations of knowledge, constructed and used for specific purposes and filling functions during social conflicts. He also delineates conspiracy theory as a separate genre. For something to qualify as conspiracy theory it should be a narrative, and it will as such have recurring stylistic elements and functions—doing the 'cultural work' of forging identities and articulating conflict (Butter 2014: 21). How conspiracy theory creates 'knowledge' of Self, Other, and conflict that may be "particularly powerful" (20) is also of interest to psychological research, which means that the interests above could draw actively on the findings and the building blocks used from that discipline. However, psychological research on conspiracy thinking usually starts at a much lower level, and has a more universal outlook that centres on what 'we all share'.

Psychological research looks at both social and cognitive aspects of conspiracy theory, emphasising personality differences as well as contextual, group-related aspects. The most generic building blocks of conspiracy theory as conceptualised by psychologists revolve around almost universal elements of human cognition. Examples include the theory of mind module (the ability to infer the mental states of others), without which it is hard to attribute agency and see intentions as causes of events. Attribution of intention also involves projection of one's own intentionality. This includes the recognition of deceptive behaviour, selfishness, hostility, and the capacity for destruction and violence. Another basic element following from a theory of mind is the recognition of human capacity for communication and cooperation, including in competitive struggles over limited resources. The interest in conspiracy thinking as such is typically tied to cognitive and social psychology, where it is recognised as fundamentally human, making use of (mostly) normal spectrum cognitive behaviour, but employing these in combinations that skew judgments towards the epistemically unlikely. Research topics include studying

which combinations of tendencies go together with regular conspiracy thinking, for whom, and under what conditions.

The psychological study of conspiracy theory most often relates to the 'conspiracist mindset', finding that some people are more prone to use conspiracy as explanation than others, adopting it at an early stage of exploration both in lieu of, and contradicting, evidence (Dieguez *et al.* 2016: 23). While both psychology and sociology study correlates that predict this propensity, they may select and analyse variables differently. Psychological research shows that people who exhibit a conspiratorial mindset—or conspiracy mentality—are likely to over-attribute agency as cause, showing "hyper-sensitive agency detection" (Douglas *et al.* 2016) and "biased attributions of intentionality" (Brotherton and French 2015). They are also more likely to project "Machiavellian" intentions (Douglas and Sutton 2011), and would declare themselves willing to do what they think conspirators do. Conspiracy reasoning seems, like many forms of partisanship-oriented 'hot' reasoning, to be tied to motivated cognition, a form of identity-protective cognition.

The latter ties into conspiracy theory as a socio-cognitive phenomenon. Conspiracy theories tend to "presume an intergroup dimension" (Cichocka *et al.* 2015: 43; van Prooijen and van Lange 2014). They are collective "in terms of the context of their origin" (Krekó 2015: 64), as well as in their targets, helping to divide in-group from out-group. In defence of the former, they supply explanations of the world that are self-serving for the in-group. Conspiracy theory functions as identity-protective, "motivated, collective cognition" (Krekó 2015: 64).

Relating to the intergroup dimension of conspiracy belief, social psychology includes a specific type of belief: conspiracy stereotypes (Kofta and Sedek 2005; Bilewicz and Sedek 2015). A conspiracy stereotype is an out-group construction that includes the ascription of high group-entitativity (that is, seeing the out-group as a single entity rather than a collection of individuals), so that the out-group can be treated as an intentional agent on par with an individual. The conspiracy-related ascriptions include high group egoism and secret collective behaviour, furthering the egoistic, collective goals of the group (see Bilewicz and Sedek 2015: 4). Antecedents include authoritarianism and political alienation related to a "general perception of threats in one's social environment" (Bilewicz and Sedek 2015: 6). This anxiety may be related to experiences of victimhood, relative deprivation, and loss of control. Loss of control "leads to illusory pattern perception," including conspiracy theories, where the latter may be activated by a prior identification of one's in-group as victims (10–11). In-group, collective narcissism (fragile beliefs in one's own group's greatness) increases conspiracy beliefs of this type (Cichocka *et al.* 2015: 44–46).

All these building blocks assembled to explain the functions, backgrounds, expressions of, and increased tendency towards conspiracy thinking are generically human. That is the point of the building blocks: they are not yet the cultural outcome we identify by the label 'conspiracy theory'. When we look at these behaviours, biases, and propensities in combination, it becomes more difficult to separate the dimension of narrative from that of knowledge: Conspiracy theory as 'knowledge' may also be presented as an outcome and as an activity involving narration. While we will discuss approaches to narration more thoroughly in the following section, it is pertinent to note already at this point that looking at the narrative activity of conspiracy theorising is a way to frame its knowledge claims in context among users: it includes actors doing things for a purpose because these activities fulfil functions under specific circumstances. One possible form of such 'conspiracy talk' that has attracted the interest of psychologists is rumour (DiFonzo 2015). The rumour process consists in collective storytelling and information gathering and evaluation, which tends to arise out of situations of, for example, perceived threat and distrust. Rumours contain "unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements" (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007: 13), where people turn to their in-group to gain and verify information and its interpretation, thus creating 'knowledge'. The rumour activity produces meaning and gives a sense of control. Rumours constitute part of a group's information economy and social exchange.

When the content of rumour concerns hidden conspiracies, scholars may use the rumour process to explain the dissemination of the narrative: rumour discussion shows collective "group thinking" (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007: 13); it involves participants making sense of information in local settings; it concerns information that is "instrumentally relevant" (13), for example for managing threat; it may be driven by group identity, and fulfil functions such as "alliance making and maintenance, and enforcement of communal norms" (15).

As we see, the contextualisation of the 'knowledge' dimension of conspiracy theory as a situated collective activity involving narrative offers up some new combinations of building blocks, promising new insights if we change the direction of our gaze. With that in mind, let us now turn to narrative and narration.

6 Conspiracy Theory as Narrative

Conspiracy theory is typically conceptualised as both knowledge claim and narrative, but focusing on the narrative aspect yields a slightly different cluster of interests. The key foci for studying conspiracy theories as narrative are

questions of content, style, situatedness, and cultural products. The content dimension remains largely the same as what we have discussed under the rubric of 'knowledge claims', as it covers stories about (mostly) human actors engaging in (secret) activities that have relevant social and material effects, stories that tend to have clear protagonists and antagonists. A focus on style looks at how these stories are told and with which kinds of narrative ingredients. Situatedness relates primarily to the different contexts of narration, including the social behaviour and status of narrators and listeners. Products are particularly central to analyses of conspiracy culture, with relevant behaviour ranging all the way up to the complexities of globalised consumer capitalism.

The style of conspiratorial narratives may concern traits said to be typical or recurrent in the stories, whether in the local context or in human storytelling more generally, such as dualism, apocalypticism (Hofstadter 1964), narrative speed and pivots (Fenster 2008), cast of actor roles (hero, villains, defectors, victims), fact-fiction reversals (Barkun 2003: 29–33), and scope. The prevalence of some of the elements may require historical explanations, while others are explained by literary conventions or psychological aspects. The scope and speed of contemporary conspiracy narratives are, for example, said to be larger and quicker than in the conspiracy narratives of earlier eras, with sociocultural factors such as new media environments part of the explanation of why, for example, more world-encompassing conspiracies appear to be narrated now than before (see Coward and Swann 2004; Butter 2014). Historical conflict forms part of the explanatory schemes for particular casts of heroes and villains, especially when conflict is seen as an explanation for the narrative activity in the first place.

The situatedness of narratives may address both the end products of (popular) culture and the everyday activities in which conspiracy is narrated. 'Conspiracy talk', an example of the latter, can be the simplest forms of emplotment of threat and mystery. While it may be related to rumour processes, it also points to another element important to conspiracy narration in general: its ability to entertain. Narrating people-in-situation episodes that involve (suspicion of) conspiracy—plots—is an important element of successful popular entertainment, which both follows and creates narrative conventions. Both in popular culture and in everyday talk, stories about plots have a dimension of pleasure—in narration, in discovery, and in revelation of mystery (Fenster 2008)—and they may generate social status by creating an audience for a narrator at the centre of attention (Simmel 1906). Conspiracy talk in context can thus be an activity that aids in shaping and maintaining an in-group. It can do so by 'mere' entertainment, but also by drawing up boundaries: presenting enemy images of out-groups, constructing meaning and moral boundaries,

creating and maintaining internal hierarchy in regulating roles of speakers and listeners, testing and maintaining loyalty. These functions all supply relevance and salience to conspiracy talk, making it more likely that it will be remembered and repeated.

Conspiracy theory as narrative is of particular interest to 'cultural studies' approaches. Even when the topic is literature and film, narrative presents and constructs knowledge; it promotes, questions, or counters specific constructions of reality. Conversely, the act of treating reality as narrative does something to how reality is constructed: it "transforms the chaos that is unmediated reality into a well-ordered account" where post hoc means propter hoc (Butter 2014: 22), and "everything becomes a sign, a clue, a piece of a larger puzzle" (Coale 2005: 4). The effect is that any particular piece of information is fitted into design, and made to embody "meaning as part of a larger intentional plot" (Coale 2005: 4). A conspiracy narrative "makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for complex events in a clear, if frightening, way" writes English literature specialist Timothy Melley (2000: 8), who explains (or interprets) conspiracy theory functionally, as attempts "to defend the integrity of the self against the social order" (2000: 10). Many will thus fit into a particular genre, with set characters and plots, so that "[w]hat emerges, finally, is the romance of the quest narrative, the initiated Good Guy versus the villainous Bad Guy" (Coale 2005, 19). Narrative serves to restore feelings of meaning and agency. The cultural analysis serves to locate the conditions of these narratives in, for example, the components of liberal individualism, where the self is "an atomistic, rational agent," and the concept of agency is "all-or-nothing" (Melley 2000: 25).

While Melley partially locates conspiracy narratives in an ideology that sees intention as "the supreme cause of events" (2000: 25), American studies professor Peter Knight focuses instead on the narrator's perceived loss of agency, whatever the causes. Conspiracy narratives are, as with Melley, primarily driven by suspicion about hidden forces that block "rugged individual agency" for ordinary people, but these forces may be seen as either intentional or as impersonal and systemic. The boundaries are fluid. The central point is neither narrative in the narrow sense, nor intentional, planned conspiracy, but a 'world-construction' that presents threats to agency and builds on cynicism, suspicion, and desire for discovery. Conspiracy culture may relate to and express underlying conflicts, but since it "fulfills diverse functions in different arenas" conflict is not the only dimension of relevance to cultural analysis (Knight 2000: 20).

Psychology has had relatively little to say about conspiracy theorising as narration. One exception is Nicholas DiFonzo, who, as discussed above, transfers

some of the research on rumour processes to conspiracy theory. Looking specifically at transmission antecedents and aims, he asks: "What are the factors affecting the likelihood of hearing and transmitting CTs? How does transmission affect changes in CT content, and by what mechanisms? What antecedents and aims are most relevant for CTs to spread?" (2015: 3). The questions prompt investigation into the contexts of narration as an activity as well as studies of how conspiracy theories are represented over a series of retellings. As he notes, there are few psychological studies into conspiracy theories "as *communicated* ideas" (2015: 4 [emphasis in original]). He suggests some possible research questions drawing on findings from folklore studies and anthropology, but also from within social psychology: we should, for instance, research the role of distrust, anxiety, and uncertainty as antecedents to narrating conspiracy, and the role of relationship-enhancement and self-enhancement as aims (2015: 4).

Summing up, discussions of conspiracy theory as narrative and knowledge may draw lines to rumour (DiFonzo 2015), gossip (Birchall 2006), or legend (Barkun 2003), with some attempts at finding items of convergence as well as difference between these as genres (Butter 2014). We should also pay more attention to conspiracy theory as narrative behaviour, the activity of narration, and to narrative context. There are some promising lines of study that may open up a wider sense of narrative and narration in context (see Ellis 2001). Folklore studies has long adopted the concept of ostensive action (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983), which stresses that "telling … need not always be identical with talking" (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983: 5). With motifs (actors, objects, action sequences) as central building blocks, narratives may form the context of real-life action, motivating and shaping behaviour to enact the narrative, thus turning it into 'fact'—or into play. The latter is the case for what has been called pseudo-ostensive action, when someone acts in a manner that consciously attempts to deceive others into taking the narrative as fact.

The purely ostensive action, acting out central ideas of the narrative, may be rare for conspiracy theory, but it does help us understand how the remedial actions of extremist conspiracists mirror central ideas of their conspiracy beliefs (compare Hofstadter 1964). The concept of quasi-ostensive action covers situations where a collective is caught up in the narrative and uses it to read the world and act towards others (and each other) as if the story was true. This kind of approach proved useful to analyse several aspects of the Satanism scare, where different social formations acted out their own ideas of Satanic conspiracy, sometimes leading to panics. It may also be a relevant perspective for episodes when the narrative becomes an official one, whether as propaganda or sincere belief, and guides judicial procedures (show trials, mass persecutions of political opposition etc., but perhaps also less overtly in

foreign and domestic policy, for example immigration). In culture, all these ways of reading, employing, and acting on/as narrative may compete; the pseudo-ostensive prank is read (cynically or otherwise) as ostensive proof.

7 Building Blocks of Conspiracy Theory and Religion

This brief dip into the bag of ingredients should give us a tentative grasp of some of the interests that make different bits of human cognition, norms, and interaction stand out as relevant building blocks of conspiracism for different academic disciplines. Now, how to get a grasp on the intersections of conspiracy theory and religion? Religion encompasses everything from large institutions to individual beliefs and practices, with products and processes mediating between them adding to the complexity. Studies of religion and conspiracy theory may therefore draw on and test a variety of theories, conceptualisations, and empirical findings from a broad range of disciplines. Let us now take a brief look at how conspiracy theory as narrative and knowledge might be addressed by scholars of religion, and discern how they relate to building blocks recognised by other disciplines discussed so far.

One particularly helpful angle from the history of religion is provided by the critical study of myth (Lincoln 1989). 'Myth' in this sense of the word is defined not by content, but "by the claims that are made by their narrators and the way in which those claims are received" (Lincoln 1989: 24). Myth is thus distinguished from fable, legend, and history to the degree it is taken by interlocutors to claim truth, be credible, and possess authority. Like fable, any conspiracy narrative may be "accepted as fictions" (24)—i.e., entertainment—but they may also promote truth claims that are not deemed credible ('legend'). Some may press claims that are given an element of empirical credence ('history'), but only those that additionally are taken to speak with authority are termed myth. These are given "the status of *paradigmatic* truth … somewhat akin to that of charters, models, templates, and blueprints" (24; emphasis in original). Other stories, including fictions and histories, will be viewed through the fundamental authority of myth. This does not only go for 'religious' stories: For example, historical research on 'the scientific revolution' has often been narrated within the mythic framework of 'Western civilisation' heroically rising from the 'darkness' of the Middle Ages towards 'enlightenment' and 'modernity' through the light of 'reason' (see, for instance, Josephson-Storm 2017).

Myth in this sense is not to be taken in the colloquial sense of a factually incorrect claim about events, but rather as the macro-historical paradigm that grants specific narratives their meaning and significance in the present. Myth

is more than narrative, but when it is narrated, it typically invokes the 'groupiness' of a social group, drawing attention to its internal and external boundaries. The invocation evokes those boundaries, creating them where there was the slightest possibility of fission. Articulated myth is thus a form of speech act that is inherently political, and serves to create 'interested knowledge', knowledge in the service of a cause and involved with power. The study of 'ritual' tells us that narrating and enacting such narratives includes overt displays of group loyalty to whatever 'group' is evoked (Rappaport, 1979).

The conceptualisation above allows for conspiracy theory to fit into any of the four categories (fable, legend, history, myth), depending on circumstances. This perspective can accommodate negotiations over truth, credibility, and authority over time, within and across groups. Nevertheless, the most relevant for the study of conspiracy theory *in* and *as* religion is perhaps conspiracy theory as uniquely authoritative myth, especially when entering political life with the added authority of organised religion, in struggles over hegemony and fighting the evil Other.

The latter elements may also enter the study through a structuralist perspective, treating conspiracy motifs as mythemes: generic elements commonly deployed in narrations of myth (compare Levi-Strauss 1974: 210–212). Combining this with Lincoln's concept of myth as a group's paradigmatic truth, it is not a surprise that the credibility and authority of specific conspiracist mythemes are measured not by norms of rationality and evidence, but rather by the way that claims are articulated in the context of stories the transcendent authority of which is already assumed.

To get a better grip on how such conspiracy mythemes are constructed we may again draw on Taves' approach to religion as constructed around 'special things': 'conspiracy mythemes' set certain events apart, framing them as salient, and typically connect them with 'sacred' stories and community values. As an element of myth, conspiracy theory creates a "narrative gravity" (Nair 2002) focused on the community being threatened (compare Hofstadter 1964), on the values presented through their transgression, on the idealised (or demonised) enemies that do the transgression ("atrocity tales"; see Bromley *et al.* 1979), and an idealised collective past as distinct from the threatening and chaotic present. Borrowing Dennett's idea of 'the self' as a centre of narrative gravity (Dennett 1992), we see how the conspiracy mytheme makes it easy to integrate religious discursive elements into personal stories, for example in the form of conversion narratives and missionary rhetoric (compare Hammer 2001).

The conspiracy mytheme is almost automatically linked with another element that is common to religious myth: that of the *apokalypsis*, or 'revelation' of secrets of the past, present, and future (see O'Leary 1994). Literary theorist

Samuel Coale has suggested that conspiracy theory *is* a form of apocalyptic belief, and (given Coale's geographic focus) participates in "the American apocalyptic tradition" (Coale 2005: 20). This 'tradition' would also display the features that Landes (2011) calls "semiotic arousal" and "semiotic promiscuity," through which everything becomes "a sign, a clue, a piece of a larger puzzle" (Coale 2005: 4). Reading the signs reveals the hidden truth.

When conspiracy theory is involved in this style of 'imagining hypotheticals', does it do so in a manner related to, or different from, those regularly involved in religious imagination (see, for instance, Boyer 2001)? This question relates to how we theorise the epidemiology of conspiracist representations in and through religious populations, a question that is at once cognitive (Sperber 1996) and historical (see, for example, van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). As van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) argue, narrations of conspiracy tend to blossom in times of rapid social change (crises), as people attempt to make sense of confusing events, alleviating anxieties and uncertainties. Because the narratives thus generated offer simple, attention-grabbing, and socially relevant explanations, often reducing complex causal pictures to decisions by single-minded purposive agents, conspiratorial narrations of events enjoy an advantage in cultural transmission. This way, they tend to proliferate and outlive the experienced crisis itself, stabilising to become stock elements of a population's historical memory. Put differently, they become familiar mythemes on which cultural entrepreneurs—religious or otherwise—may draw when creating new narratives of past and present events.

This process can be seen in light of the epidemiology of religious representations studied by scholars in the cognitive science of religion (CSR), which is interested in how biases in learning and memory contribute to the way that ideas take shape, spread, mutate, and stabilise (Boyer 2001; but compare Purzycki and Willard 2016). Like stories about 'gods',' 'spirits', and other 'minimally counter-intuitive agents', for example, the learnability and transmission of conspiracy narratives is boosted by learners' intuitive grasp of agents' intentions, as well as the 'surprise' effect of 'counter-schematic' properties, such as the near-superhuman powers and the often inhumane motivations of imagined conspirators (compare Barrett *et al.* 2009). The general idea is that cultural representations, whether of events, agents, or doctrines, tend to converge on a 'cognitive optimum' that is constrained by the architecture of the mind. However, the local availability of other, compatible representations and the prior knowledge of potential learners also play a crucial role in whether a new representation is able to stabilise (Upal *et al.* 2007). This holds not only for 'minimally counterintuitive concepts', but also for perceiving, memorising, and narrating events: as research in 'event cognition' (see, for instance, Radvansky

and Zacks 2014) suggests, the salience of events (whether perceived first hand or through narrative) is determined both by the elements included in the event model itself (the mental representation of the event's structure) and by the availability of prior knowledge in the shape of 'event schemas' (scripts for specific types of events) and referent-specific knowledge (for example about an agent, object, place, institution) (Taves and Asprem 2017). These insights point to the need of looking at how conspiracy narratives get embedded in and sanctioned by communities and social formations.

Some conspiracy theorising is performed in long form, stabilised in texts that have a central place in a community. But even when they are, compression and short-form representation will still be important in real-life communication and situational meaning-making (compare Asprem 2016b: 125–126). This mirrors the relationship between 'reflective' theological correctness and 'intuitive', cognitively optimal theological *in*correctness, which is another topic of CSR (see Slone 2004; McCauley 2011). Modelling the study of conspiracy narratives in religious contexts on these approaches prompts questions such as: Can we identify features, or motifs, of conspiracist narratives that are more recurrent than others (perhaps varying with specific situations)? Can we relate them to the flow of specific religious representations (for instance, of revelation, demonic agents, utopia), or even to entire religious formations? To what extent do conspiracy narratives tend to stabilise when they are embedded in organised religious groups, and if they do, how are they adapted to changing social, political, and economic circumstances?

If we agree that conspiracy theory often fills the role of "theodicy" (Barkun 2003), an explanation of evil, it does so, argues one of us (Robertson 2016) through its construction of counterknowledge. Conspiracy narratives in this mode are theodicies of the epistemically dispossessed, Robertson stresses. Fitting this situation, "liberation of the oppressed is re-constructed as being realised through a revolution in knowledge, seizing not the means of production, but of the *means of cognition*" (2016: 207; emphasis in original). Entrepreneurs build and maintain a readership (or 'following') by claiming special knowledge, not only of the past and present, but about the conspiracy's future plans. The mode Robertson (2013) terms "rolling prophecy" combines social critique of the present with a series of 'predictions' about the future. If conspiracy theory serves as a solution to cognitive dissonance, as research into conspiracy thinking as a form of motivated cognition would argue, this would set up adherents for renewed rounds of dissonance. How is it solved? First, the continuous cycle of prophecy ascertains that there will usually be *some* successes among the majority of failures. Secondly, the rolling nature means that

it is not so much expected to predict the future as to comment on the present in a critical manner, and reflect on sinister potentialities.

Addressing the relation between conspiracy theory and religion with a focus on the material nature of both allows us to see another set of building blocks: the material things and relations that are part of the "matrix or network of components" (Meyer *et al.* 2010) that together make up the practices of religion and conspiracy culture alike. This mode of analysis highlights the specific material items and relations enlisted by conspiracist authors to prop up their narrative and make it tangibly persuasive. Conspiracy narratives are many things, but they are often also goods produced by entrepreneurs and sold in a literal marketplace, as well as the 'marketplace of ideas' (see, for example, Partridge, this volume).

Robertson's treatment of Alex Jones and conspiracist millennialism may serve as illustration:

> Jones constructs his prophecies of the imminent "fall of America," engineered by a shadowy cabal of Satan-worshiping socialists, from material things: ammunition purchases, birth certificates, chemtrails, extreme weather. At the same time, his prophecies nurture an industry producing water filters, "seed banks," and freeze dried food for the "preppers" who would survive—material expressions of their millenarianism.
>
> ROBERTSON 2015: 85

This approach will see both religion and conspiracy theory as just another way of claiming knowledge, built from material relations and the way one finds the world to work, "based on one's experiences and habits" (84). It is naturally allied with cultural studies approaches that tie historical experience to the material products, markets, and expressions of religion (see, for example, Vásquez 2011) or conspiracy theory (see, for instance, Butter 2014; Melley 2012), and to the sociology and political psychology studying power, partisan reasoning, and alliance building (see, for instance, van Prooijen and van Lange 2014). Such an approach also offers an opportunity to avoid, or at least problematise, the familiar discourse on beliefs—conspiracist or religious. Rather than inviolable propositions held in the mind, the material approach permits us to treat them as "a configuration of material things, practices, individual bodies, and social bodies" (Meyer *et al.* 2010: 209). Beliefs are not singular, nor consistent, but rather a vocabulary of options that the individual may employ in different contexts at different times (Stringer 2008). We must also recognise that individuals have multiple motivations. So, for example, Jones' belief in the

imminent fall of the financial system may not preclude him needing to earn money to pay his family's medical insurance. These factors need to be taken into account in any study that takes expressions of beliefs as evidence of 'special' ways of thinking, for example.

The two remaining editors have suggested another way of addressing "conspiracy theory *as* religion" through the lens of "esoteric knowledge" (Dyrendal 2013; Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). This approach, revisited and expanded in the present volume (see Asprem and Dyrendal, this volume), combines a historical argument about the content of key conspiracist narratives in the West, with a sociological argument about its social locations and elective affinities with 'alternative spiritualities', and a psychological argument about the mentality or cognitive style employed. It does this by activating several of the building blocks on which scholars of esotericism have drawn to construct esotericism as a form of "special knowledge" (Asprem 2016a): namely, its reliance on a discourse about secrecy and revelation (von Stuckrad 2005); its emphasis on a "form of thought" (Faivre 1994) that favours analogies, hidden patterns, arcane hermeneutic strategies, and latent powers that can be tapped into; and its construal as a historiographic category for "rejected knowledge" (Hanegraaff 2012)—forms of religious, philosophical, and technical knowledge that have gradually been extirpated from the 'canon of Western thought' through the exclusionary practices of (primarily) the protestant reformation (against paganism and magic) and the enlightenment project (against irrationality and pseudoscience). In this way, the construct of esotericism proves a useful prism for seeing connections with aspects of religious culture, and particularly when such discourse is contested and changing.

Von Stuckrad (2005, 2010) argues that, from the ancient gnostics to contemporary neoshamans, esoteric discourses typically rely on a dynamic of secrecy and revelation that is tied to claims of 'higher' or 'superior' knowledge and special epistemic means for achieving such knowledge. Moreover, rather than seeing esotericism as a 'current', he conceptualises it as a 'discursive element' running through Western culture, continuously found in religious, political, and scientific discourses (for the latter, see von Stuckrad 2014). Now, this is clearly related to the mytheme of *apokalypsis* discussed above; but precisely due to the focus on the tension between revelation and secrecy, and on the stressing of special epistemic practices, it is even better suited for seeing the dynamic of conspiracism in and as (esoteric) religion (Dyrendal 2013). Viewed as esoteric discourse, the object of conspiracist revelation is hidden power and hidden agency; but it also tends to function as an inversion of esoteric discourse, in that it seeks to reveal the secret power and agency of others rather than claiming it for oneself. Thus, the secret societies and initiatory orders

of modern esotericism often figure as sinister Others, and esoteric claims to empowering knowledge is taken seriously as the source of oppressors' superhuman strengths (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). In this sense, conspiracism enters a paradoxical and tense relationship with esoteric spokespersons. Meanwhile, the epistemic practices employed for exposing hidden agents often resembles the reading of 'signatures' and 'correspondences' popular among esotericists (Faivre 1994), but now applied to the domains of history and society rather than nature and scripture.

Another aspect of the historical connection comes to view when we take into account the non-esoteric actors that have construed esoteric discourse as rejected, marginal, and Other. The marginalisation of esoteric ideas and practices by (typically) clerical and academic authorities has sometimes resulted in conspiratorial narratives of a "subversive underground" of "the occult," threatening piety, morality, and rationality alike (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). This, indeed, is one of the elements that entered into the Satanic panic, particularly as it was expanded to target people involved with occult organisations. But more importantly for our context, the marginalisation of 'the occult' (in this context a synonym for 'the esoteric') has provided motivations for those who self-identify as occultists to cast the othering process itself through the mytheme of conspiracy: the 'higher truths' of spiritual transformation, clairvoyant sight, universal brotherhood, and free energy are consciously repressed by priests, scientists, politicians, and financiers.

8 Summing Up

Conspiracy theories always concern knowledge, power, and agency. They make privileged claims to knowledge while destabilising the knowledge claims of others; they reveal hidden, massive power structures, while promising to empower the self; and they seek to regain individual agency by seeing through the lies of conspiring others. Considered as *behaviours*, however, conspiracy theories are also always narrations of events—whether past, present, or future. When conspiracism takes the shape of a complete worldview—addressing 'big questions' of ontology (what is), epistemology (how we know), praxeology (what to do), and axiology (what to aim for) (see Taves, Asprem, and Ihm 2018)—imagining a conspiracy is what binds the present to the past and the future: the cabal explains how we got from there (the good old days) to here (the bleak present), and the battle for the future stands between the conspirators and the 'awakened'. As we hope to have shown in this section, the discipline of religious studies has an important role to play in explaining the

place of narrating conspiracy in the construction of worldviews. Moreover, we have suggested that a crucial, overarching concept for doing so is myth. 'Conspiracy' is a mytheme typically that is related to several other themes with a long history in religious contexts: the revelation of higher knowledge, the lost golden age, the coming utopia, the demonic other, the hero. Myths, however, do not reside in a vacuum, but are, as scholars of myth are well aware, always connected to concrete socio-political situations in which struggles for power, sometimes even survival, play out. Religious studies, we think, is uniquely placed for connecting these local contexts with: (1) the (panhuman) psychological and social mechanisms that help explain why this mode of understanding events emerges in the first place; and (2) the way that specific narrations are temporarily stabilised by being incorporated with existing worldviews and get improvised on by individuals and groups who apply and tweak them to suit shifting situational goals.

9 Conclusion: Narrating Events of Power, Knowledge, and Agency

We have argued that the lack of stable, generally agreed upon definitions of 'conspiracy theory' and 'religion' is the first challenge for a successful interdisciplinary approach. On the brighter side, we have suggested that the worst problems can be avoided by taking a building-block approach that: (1) seeks out basic behavioural descriptions of the content domain that researchers across disciplines are interested in; (2) has a clear view of how various disciplines further delimit and conceptualise the content domain in various directions by focusing on specific features of interests and explanatory frameworks; and (3) identifies and systematises the building blocks that these different perspectives draw on in order to explain and interpret features of both religion and conspiracy theory.

The problems with defining religion are well known, and for our purposes it was sufficient to build on Taves' attempt to reverse engineer the concept. More important for us was to extend this approach to the study of conspiracism. In lieu of a definition of conspiracy theory, we suggested that a simple common denominator from which different disciplinary conceptualisations and operationalisations of conspiracy theory tend to move is the behaviour of narrating events in a mode that claims special knowledge about agency and power.

This behaviour is, as our literature review has shown, related to a large number of functions and is explained in various ways. Many of the functions, which are located both on a psychological and a social level and always bound up with local contexts, are shared with religion in some of its dominant constructions (see also Wood and Douglas, this volume): Narrating conspiracy may strengthen

group identity, provide order to chaotic information, explain 'inexplicable' events, allocate blame, single out enemies for attack, distract an audience, reduce cognitive dissonance, provide a feeling of empowerment, manufacture doubt and mistrust, and so forth. One key role for theoretical and empirical work on conspiracy theories and religion is to explore these functional similarities ('conspiracy theory *as* religion'), and see if they can also be related to conspiracy theories in and about religion(s). Doing so, we have argued, requires attention to psychological and sociological research (for example, on compensatory control, attributions, identity, in-group/out-group dynamics) that may help us explain these similarities by grounding them in mechanisms (building blocks) that work across different cultures and historical periods, but also to empirically grounded studies of cases by ethnographers and historians of religion. The latter is particularly crucial if we are to explain the development and epidemiology of conspiracist narratives in relation to religious formations.

This, we hope, demonstrates how religious studies perspectives can contribute to our general understanding of conspiracy theories in contemporary society. At the same time, an interdisciplinary approach on the lines suggested here should, we hope, prove to our religious studies colleagues that the study of conspiracism can be far more than a niche subfield in our discipline; instead, framing conspiracy theories as narratives that are situated in everyday life, entangled with power, which spin out of and fuel group processes, express and enforce social identity, and that sometimes evolve from and into complex worldviews, allows us to see that the study of conspiracy theories in, about, and as religion cuts to the very core of key issues in our field.

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CHAPTER 2

Rational Enchantments: Conspiracy Theory between Secular Scepticism and Spiritual Salvation

Stef Aupers and Jaron Harambam

1 Introduction

Over the last few decades, conspiracy theories have become a common way to make sense of horrible events. Official claims about the assassination of JFK, the attacks on 9/11, *Charlie Hebdo*, but also viruses such as Ebola, AIDS, and the Swine flu, have all been countered by alternative, yet widely shared theories about a small, secret elite that is responsible for these events. Popular television series from the *X Files* in the 1990s to the more recent *24*, *House of Cards*, and *Homeland* have incorporated conspiracy narratives related to the state, politics, science, and industry. Such media texts both shape and are shaped by a veritable "conspiracy culture" (Aupers 2012; Knight 2000; Melley 2000; Partridge 2005).

Despite this popularisation and normalisation, conspiracy theories remain widely contested. Calling someone a "conspiracy theorist" is still an excellent way to label him/her as a "paranoid lunatic," to dismiss the formulated argument as "unfounded" or "irrational" and to effectively exclude the speaker from public debate (Bratich 2008). Interestingly, academics from different disciplines have contributed to the creation of this stereotype. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud already considered conspiracy theories a symptom of a "paranoid personality"; a psychological pathology that was, ultimately, caused by repressed and sublimated homosexuality (Melley 2000). Karl Popper, in turn, considered the "conspiracy theory of society" the "very opposite of the true aim of the social sciences" and, like many contemporary academics, pointed out the epistemological and methodological fallacies in this popular type of reasoning (2013: 306). Motivated by McCarthyism in the 1950s, the historian Richard Hofstadter wrote *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1966), in which he traced the origins of (right-wing) paranoia and warned against its radical, extremist and dangerous implications for modern democracy. Informed by such portrayals, various contemporary academics have considered the recent spread of conspiracy theories an "epidemic" (Robins and Post 1997), a "plague" (Showalter 1998) and "a poisonous discourse" that "encourages a vortex of illusions and superstitions" (Pipes 1997: 173).

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Instead of studying conspiracy theory as a meaningful culture in its own right, much of the writing in the social sciences is dedicated to pathologising conspiracy theory and its advocates (Knight 2000). Conceptualising conspiracy theory as 'religion' has played a significant role in this. In this chapter we therefore aim to study the particular role of 'religion' in the academic debate about conspiracy theories and critically evaluate its heuristic value in the understanding of conspiracy theory as a cultural phenomenon. In the first part, we will analyse the academic appropriation of the concept of 'religion' as a trope to pathologise conspiracy theory and, in doing so, legitimate the superiority of the social sciences. Based on the self-understanding of conspiracy theorists, we will in the second part open up the hybrid character of contemporary conspiracy theory and situate it as a complex phenomenon at the intersection of secular scepticism, social science, and religious meaning-making. This part of the analysis is loosely based on an analysis of qualitative in-depth interviews with about 20 conspiracy theorists active in the Netherlands—their discourses, worldviews, and social identities (Harambam, 2017; Harambam and Aupers 2015, 2016).

2 Boundary Work: Claiming Epistemic Authority

In academic writing, conspiracy theories have been constantly compared with religious belief, at least since the seminal essay of Karl Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies* (2013 [1945]). Aiming his critical arrows primarily at the teleological historicism of Plato, Hegel, and Marx, he dedicated attention to what he called "the conspiracy theory of society." Such popular theories, he argued, overemphasise human intention, causality, and design in the constitution of the social world and downplay the fact that society is the unforeseen outcome of multiple interacting agents, organisations, and institutions (Popper 2013: 307). Popper concludes that a simplistic conspiracy theory is non-scientific, the 'opposite' of the social sciences and, more than that, a primitive remnant from our premodern past. "The conspiracy theory of society," he argues, is "a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition. The Gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups—sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from" (306).

Since Karl Popper, this comparison of conspiracy theories with 'religious belief' has become a permanent feature in academic writing. On the one hand, contemporary academics are pointing out that conspiracy theorists, like religious groups, *believe* in something that transcends empirical observation. From this position, Craig James asks rhetorically:

> Are conspiracy theories just another religion, full of improvable beliefs, with nothing but faith to sustain them? I am struck by the parallel between monotheism and conspiracy theories: people are far more likely to believe that there is a single person or small group "up there" who are in control. The parallels to God are striking.
>
> JAMES 2010

On the other hand, academics argue that conspiracy theories, like religious beliefs, provide 'ultimate meaning': by constructing a coherent and grand narrative about good, evil, and suffering in the world, they construct what Max Weber called a "religious theodicy" (1948 [1919]). Like religious systems of beliefs, "the conspiratorial worldview offers the comfort of knowing that while tragic events occur, they at least occur for a reason" (Keeley 1999: 124). As such, they provide explanations for the suffering of humanity on earth: "in the search for a reason why evil things happen to [people], they soon come upon another group [which] causes them to suffer by effecting dark, evil and secretly worked out plans against them" (Groh 1987: 1). The hidden truths conspiracy theorists discover may be dark and disturbing, but having knowledge about it "makes redemption possible" (Aaronovitch 2010: 341) and provides "answers to all questions of and prescriptions for salvation" (Pipes 1997: 22).

Although the analysis of these authors contributes to understanding the elements of religious meaning informing conspiracy theory, they are not value-free analyses. Comparing the social phenomenon conspiracy theory with religion is often accompanied with the moral argument that the former is an 'irrational' way of looking at the world—a meaningful, yet illusionary world view that no longer fits the scientific understanding of our natural and social-cultural reality. Conspiracy theorists, Keeley explains, "embody a thoroughly outdated world view" since "nobody—not God, not us, not even some of us—is in control. The world is uncontrollable [and] without broad meaning and significance," and this is something "the conspiracy theorist refuses to accept" (Keeley 1999: 123–124). Conspiracy theories may be presented by their advocates as empirically grounded theories or even full-fledged scientific explanations, but in reality, their critics tell us, they are unfounded religious beliefs. Several academics therefore invest much of their efforts in debunking conspiracy theories as 'pseudo-science': they display a "crippled epistemology" (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 212) and their advocates "inhabit a different epistemic universe, where the usual rules for determining truth and falsity do not apply" (Barkun 2006: 187). Leaning on the heritage of Karl Popper, Michael Barkun argues in this respect: "conspiracy theories are at their heart unfalsifiable. No matter how much evidence their adherence accumulate, belief in

conspiracy theory ultimately becomes a matter of faith rather than proof" (Barkun 2006: 7). Besides this 'confirmation bias', scholars argue that conspiracy theories are "resistant and in extreme cases invulnerable to contrary evidence" (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 223). These scholars conclude that like extremist religious groups, sects, and cults, conspiracy theorists adopt a radical position and hold on to their faith. In the words of Olmsted: "conspiracists come to believe in their theories the way zealots believe in their religion: nothing can change their mind" (2009: 11).

Calling conspiracy theory 'religion' is not only functional in labelling it as 'irrational' or 'pathological', but also legitimates the epistemological and methodological superiority of the social sciences. Constructing such clear-cut boundaries between 'irrational' and 'rational' knowledge, Thomas Gieryn (1983) argues, is a form of professional "boundary work" with the function to defend, support, and legitimate the superiority of science vis-à-vis other forms of knowledge. Gieryn argues: "descriptions of science as distinctly truthful, useful, objective or rational, may at best be seen as ideologies" and always part of a relentless "struggle for authority, power and resources" (1983: 792–793). This is in itself not new: the history of science has long been a 'border war', since boundaries with other intellectual activities are neither stable nor permanently settled (Haraway 2001 [1985]: 29). Boundary work has therefore always been part of the scientific enterprise to defend and maintain its monopoly in a broader field of knowledge production (Gieryn 1999; Shapin 2008). However, the practice of professional boundary work has become particularly relevant in contemporary society where the epistemic authority of science is increasingly contested (Achterberg *et al.* 2015; Harambam and Aupers, 2015). Empirical studies demonstrate that there is growing scepticism among Western citizens vis-à-vis scientific institutions and authorities, the knowledge they produce and the (technical) solutions they propose. Based on a large survey that compares different countries in Europe, Ronald Inglehart concludes that "a diminishing confidence that science and technology will help solve humanity's problems … has advanced farthest in the economically and technologically most advanced societies" (1997: 79). Such discontents about scientific institutions and authorities, however, did not extinguish the "will to truth" (Foucault 1970 [1966]) and cannot easily be read as a symptom of cultural cynicism, disillusion, or disempowerment. Rather, it has opened up a market for experts producing knowledge that is labelled as unscientific, irrational, or dangerous by regular scientists, but is nevertheless massively embraced by late-modern citizens; we may think about the rise of alternative medicine or holistic healing practices (Campbell 2007). The conspiracy theory is yet another example of (formerly) "stigmatized knowledge" (Barkun 2006: 15–38) becoming more

popular: in their explanatory accounts, conspiracy theories compete with conventional claims and explanations about reality and are hence involved in an "interpretive contest" (Melley 2000: 17) with scientific experts.

In this cultural climate of epistemic insecurity 'boundary work' becomes a salient practice in the sciences. Calling conspiracy theory a 'religion' is ultimately a discursive strategy to establish an 'asymmetrical relation' between modern social science and conspiracy theory, the latter being framed and disqualified as the primitive Other of the former (Latour 1993). But is it? By analysing the complex, and often contradictory, self-understandings of conspiracy thinkers we arrive at different conclusions.

3 Paranoia as Radical Scepticism

The image of conspiracy theories as religious superstition and their advocates as dogmatic believers, has by now been critiqued in academia by various scholars. Based on the analysis of conspiracy narratives in literature, film, and media text, Peter Knight argues that traditional conspiracy theories may have been a dogmatic way of 'scapegoating' and expressing anxieties about 'outsiders'—for instance Jews, Muslims, or communists (2000). Since the counterculture of the 1960s, however, conspiracy theories more often indicate radical suspicion, reflexivity, and scepticism about our 'own' modern institutions, the state, politics, media, and industries. Contemporary conspiracy theories, Timothy Melley adds, critically resist the social control these institutions exert over the individual and express "radical doubt about how knowledge is produced and about the authority of those who produce it" (2000: 13). From this perspective, conspiracy theories cannot easily be understood as an "irrational" religious dogma. Quite the contrary: a paranoid habitus is a "tactical" (Fenster 1999: xiii), "necessary" (Knight 2000: 8), "reasonable" (Marcus 1999: 2), "logical" (Melley 2000: 14),and "understandable" (Olmsted 2009: 11) response to the complexities and uncertainties of (post)modern society.

This analysis in academia resonates strongly with the self-understanding of contemporary conspiracy theorists. In our study of conspiracy theorists in the Netherlands, we found that they generally deny the label 'conspiracy theorist'—with its well-known connotation of irrationality and religious belief—by collectively stating that "I am not a conspiracy theorist" (Harambam and Aupers 2016). More than that: they consider themselves 'critical thinkers' debunking all kinds of dogma and collective misperceptions since they, in their own words, are "sceptic by nature," "dare to think differently," "think out of the box," and "put question marks over nearly everything." Critical thinking, one of

them argues, is "to look at things from multiple perspectives, to consult multiple sources, but mostly to think for yourself and to be able to adjust previously held convictions." When confronted with people arguing that their worldview is overly irrational, pathological, and ultimately paranoid, conspiracy theorists often turn the tables by asking: who is (ir)rational? Citizens who trust and fully rely on governments, industries and media? Or citizens who are highly sceptical about their workings, directions, and ultimate goals? After all, they argue, there have been too many 'real' conspiracies to debunk conspiracy theorists as irrational or pathological: from the Watergate affair in 1972, Black budget operations of the CIA in the 1970s and 1980s, to the recent surveillance activities of the NSA. These are all scandals that contribute to the plausibility of conspiracy theories and the rationality of paranoia (Pigden 1995). In short, in their claim to rationality, conspiracy theorists defend that a habitus of paranoia is a form of healthy scepticism that is pivotal in the contemporary modern world. Referring to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), they argue: "Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not after you."

Conspiracy theorists are particularly critical of modern institutions: mass-media, financial institutions, medical industries, money-making multinationals, powerful governments, and modern science. They question the truth claims made by 'experts' representing such institutions. Why should we believe what the authorities are saying? Why should we trust the 'objective findings' and interpretations of scientists? The official explanations of politicians about what 'really' happened? Or the authenticity of mass-mediated images in news programs? As one respondent in our interviews typically argues about modern media: "Don't trust video or film anymore, because we can do everything. You don't know what you're really looking at. You can't trust images anymore." As veritable sceptics, conspiracy theorists may not even trust their own senses because the question pops up: am I really seeing what I think I am seeing? Or am I successfully brainwashed? And, how do I tell the difference?

Interestingly, conspiracy theorists are not only thinking about themselves as critical thinkers but they often refer to themselves as veritable scientific researchers. Their stance towards modern science is highly ambivalent: on the one hand, they legitimate their theories by extensively referring to 'respected' scientists, alleged 'scientific evidence' and academic disciplines varying from psychology, computer sciences, to quantum physics and the like. On the other hand, however, they explicitly distinguish themselves from conventional scholars and institutionalised science. Established scientists are allegedly bound up with the power and financial interests of institutions. Dutch conspiracy thinkers, for example, use research on global warming and big pharma as illustrations to show that "scientific research is never independent. Because: from who do

they receive the money?" In addition, conspiracy theorists are pointing out that conventional scientists are blinded by conventional paradigms, scientific rules, and methodological procedures. "What we are doing," one of them argues, "is looking through a keyhole and everything we cannot see is simply nonsense." In line with New Age critiques, a sub-group in the milieu particularly questions the materialistic worldview, dualism, and reductionism in modern science (cf. Hanegraaff 1997). In general, conspiracy theorists try to "purify" science: they pretend to be non-dogmatic, highly reflexive, and more sceptical than regular scientists. They think they embody the "spirit of free enquiry" that has allegedly evaporated from contemporary scientific institutions. Their argument is simply that modern science is not scientific enough since it has lost its scepticism over the last centuries—an unbiased, open form of curiosity that should be the starting point of every good scientist (Harambam and Aupers 2015).

If we look at modern science and its development, we may, of course, argue that it always had two faces since "science depends not [only] on the inductive accumulation of proofs but [also] on the methodological principle of doubt" (Giddens 1991: 21). Radical scepticism about epistemological foundations and methodological rules has been an intricate part of the modern scientific enterprise since the sixteenth century. This "hidden agenda of modernity" has always haunted the positivistic quest for absolute certainty—the Cartesian ambition to find de-contextualised, universal and timeless laws that could legitimate the scientific enterprise (Toulmin 1990). Nowadays, however, scepticism about scientific claims and methods has trickled down from the ivory towers of philosophers to the lay public. Conspiracy theorists, allegedly putting "question marks over nearly everything," exemplify this trend. Instead of being full-fledged believers, they generally have a sceptical habitus and typically assume that "nothing is certainly true, but anything might be true" (Dyrendal 2013).

4 Conspiracy Theories as Popular Sociology

Discourses of conspiracy theorists do not just show similarity with scepticism but also with some of the main premises and assumptions in the social sciences. This is not surprising since social scientists and conspiracy theorists share the same object of analysis: modern society. Conspiracy theories, Melley (2000) rightly states, are somewhat nervous, dramatic claims about modern forms of social control exerted by modern institutions. Like sociologists, they start from the assumption that individuals do not have full agency; basically, they are controlled by overpowering social forces, are socialised in a particular worldview, and internalise established norms and values. If we look in more

detail, however, we see that the discourses of conspiracy theorists show an affinity with particular theoretical strands in sociology: social constructivism and critical theory.

4.1 *Staged Reality and Social Constructivism*

In their influential book *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann emphasise that reality as we experience it has, of course, emerged from subjective intentions and social interaction between individuals. Once established, however, it becomes a reified and rationalised social structure that alienates the individual citizen: man "is imprisoned in the objective reality of his society" and "that reality is subjectively presented to him in an alien and truncated matter" (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 185). Likewise conspiracy theorists argue that the world is constructed since 'everything is staged'—individuals are dealing with an alienating world of institutions, organisations, and media images that is no longer of their own making. Jodi Dean, from this perspective, has made the point that popular conspiracy theories about 'aliens' governing the world are quite literal expressions of sentiments of alienation in society: we are living in an "alien nation" (Dean 1998). Not surprising, then, is the fact that some of the metaphors used in sociology show a strong affinity with those expressed in conspiracy culture: images of society as an "iron cage" of bureaucratic rules (Max Weber), an all-seeing "panopticon" (Michel Foucault), or an omnipresent "technocracy" (Theodore Roszak). Each of these metaphors emphasise overpowering social systems that threaten human values and individual freedom. Such sociological notions about modern society indicate what Timothy Melley calls "agency panic" that is at the heart of conspiracy theories. He argues:

> By agency panic, I mean the intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control—the conviction that one's actions are controlled by someone else, that one has been "constructed" by powerful external agents.
>
> MELLEY 2000: 12

But also, sociological theories emphasising social constructivism on the micro level show an elective affinity with basic assumptions in the milieu of conspiracy thinkers. Ervin Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical approach may provide an example. He considers social reality to be a theatre—a stage where individual actors play their roles, based on pre-written scripts, cues, and props. Indeed, "reality is staged": what seems to be authentic, spontaneous, and real behaviour is, in fact, a socially orchestrated performance. Particular public

institutions are the places where we construct a perfect, smooth, and seductive 'front stage' reality to cover up for the real 'back stage' intentions of social groups. In the theories of Goffman, these backstage realities are the less controlled, more chaotic, and messy parts of social life. For conspiracy theorists, it is the other way around: 'back stage realities' are the spaces from where evil elites, like the true directors of a play, actually pull the strings of social life.

4.2 *False Consciousness and Critical Theory*

This brings us to an important difference between assumptions made by conspiracy theorists and social constructivists. For one, social constructivists point out the 'constructed', 'staged', and 'alienating' dimension of social structures yet deny any intentionality. There is no particular interest or will to power involved; social systems are basically the unforeseen and, sometimes, undesired side-effect of human actions (see, for instance, Beck 1992; Weber 1948). In general, this is quite different with conspiracy theories. They point out the secret agenda of powerful social groups operating within modern society and its institutions. We find this for instance in the grand theories of figures such as David Icke, Alex Jones, or the Zeitgeist movement. In *Zeitgeist: The Movie*, the first film documentary by the latter movement, it is, for instance, stated: "The last thing the power establishment wants is a conscious, informed public capable of critical thinking. It is in their interest to keep you in a distracted, naïve bubble. And they're doing a damn good job."[1] Although statements such as these cannot easily be aligned with social constructivism, it does show a strong affinity with another respectable tradition in the social sciences: critical theory. Developed in the so-called Frankurter Schule, with work by Herbert Marcuse (*One-Dimensional Men*, 1964) and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (*Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 2010 [1944]) being good examples. In a neo-Weberian fashion, they claim that modern citizens are alienated through the highly standardised 'system' of instrumental rationality, rules, and procedures. Following Karl Marx, they argue that the machineries of modern capitalism not only exploit producers working in factories, but increasingly also seduce consumers through the 'culture industry' of radio, film, and advertising. Standardised and commodified media messages enter the private sphere and colonise the life-worlds of individuals. As Horkheimer and Adorno would have it: "The stronger the positions of the culture industry become, the more … it can deal with consumers' needs, producing them, controlling them" (2010: 144).

At the heart of such critical theories is the Marxist assumption of 'false consciousness'. Not unlike the statement of the Zeitgeist movement about keeping

1 At https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrHeg77LF4Y&feature=plcp. Accessed 20/04/2018.

citizens in a "distracted, naïve bubble," critical theorists hold that personal freedom is a well-crafted illusion that is only of interest to modern capitalism. It is basically a commodified enchantment of the modern world—a mass-produced form of "pseudo individualism" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2010: 154–155) that obscures the hegemony of capitalism, the material gains it strives for and the radical social control it exerts. We think we are free, but in fact, we are not. Quite the contrary: even our senses and 'private' emotions are no longer to be trusted: what we think, feel, smell, or see is an illusion created by modern institutions and media. How different is this respectable critical theory from some of the statements of David Icke? He talks about the construction of false consciousness through brainwashing, mind control, and mass hypnosis through modern media. The affinity between the allegedly 'rational' critical theory and 'irrational' conspiracy theory, finally, is not limited to its social analysis. Both discourses embody straightforward revolutionary attempts to 'wake up' alienated citizens: they aim to set them free from their imprisoned souls by showing the real, awful truth.

All in all, the conclusion is that the discourses of the social sciences and conspiracy theory—so radically separated in academia and public debate—in fact show an elective affinity: paranoid statements about social systems and mind control may be understood as popularised sociological discourses. And vice versa: sociological approaches, particularly, critical theory, easily slides into a paranoid form of sociology. Both discourses, Martin Parker argued, "claim to uncover (supposedly) 'hidden' plots or machineries which have caused a particular state of affairs or events to take place" (2001: 191). And indeed: if we take some sociological critical theories out of their professional context, they might as well have been formulated by a 'conspiracy theorist'. The following claim made by the famous sociologist C. Wright Mills about the 'power elite' may serve as a final example:

> For they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They rule the big corporations. They run the machinery of the state … They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they enjoy.
>
> MILLS 1956: 4

The affinity between conspiracy theories and sociological theories, may also provide an extra explanation for the fanatic practices of 'boundary work' found in the social sciences. This 'boundary work' is not only apparent in

'neo-positivist' sociology, but also (and perhaps even more so) in 'critical' and 'constructivist' currents in sociology. It may be telling that Bruno Latour has called conspiracy theories "an absurd deformation of our own arguments" (2004: 230). Ironically, it is exactly because there are so many similarities between both perspectives that it becomes pivotal for social scientists to draw rigid lines and label conspiracy theories as an inferior, irrational form of knowledge in order to preserve their professional status. Calling conspiracy theories "religion," we argued, is one common strategy in this type of boundary work. But does this mean that conspiracy narratives only feature scepticism, social constructivism, and critical theory about society? Does it mean that conspiracy theories have nothing to do with religion or spirituality, as many conspiracy theorists and their defenders would argue? These assumptions are also hard to maintain.

5 Conspiracy Theories as Spiritual Salvation

Studying conspiracy theories, we also note that various assumptions in the milieu have a strong affinity with religion. Many strands of conspiracy thinking are rooted in the modern esoteric current and are converging with manifestations of New Age spirituality that proliferate outside the traditional churches (see Asprem and Dyrendal 2015; Barkun 2006; Dyrendal 2013; Partridge 2005; Robertson 2016; Ward and Voas 2011). In the context of a progressive "disenchantment of the world," we will consider the elective affinity between conspiracy theories and modern esoteric assumptions.

5.1 *"I Want to Believe"*

In *The X-Files*, agents Mulder and Scully develop theories about possible relations between phenomena, test hypotheses, and try to rationally explain seemingly inexplicable and mysterious events. While encountering various supernatural and mysterious agents in a network of conspiracies, they remain true to the scientific method of inquiry. In line with the analysis in this chapter, they present themselves as sceptics and critical thinkers. And yet, Mulder's motto "I want to believe" featuring in the *X-Files* film of 2008 exemplifies a current in conspiracy theory that is invested in spiritual meaning.

It is a truism that religious belief has become utterly problematic in modern societies (Bruce 2002). Max Weber famously wrote about a "disenchantment of the world," a long-standing process in the West that eroded mysterious accounts of nature, magic, and, ultimately, the belief in every metaphysical *Hinterwelt* that once provided the Western world with solid meaning (1978). This is the tragic dimension of modernity: science describes the world 'as it is'

but cannot, by its very nature, say anything about what the world's processes really mean. And it can, and should, be silent about what the meaning of life actually is. More than that, medical science, neurobiology, astronomy, evolutionary theory, and other disciplines actively contribute to the idea that there is no essential, inherent meaning. The intellectual imperative to pursue the truth thus contributes to a world devoid of existential meaning—a world in which "processes … simply 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything" as Weber writes (1978 [1921]: 506). Weber, and many advocates of secularisation in the twentieth century, proved to have a blind spot for the fact that exactly these problems of meaning invoke the rise of new forms of religion, spirituality and re-enchantment (Asprem 2014; Aupers and Houtman 2010). Already in Weber's time, at the beginning of the twentieth century, many of his fellow intellectuals took refuge in alternative religions and spiritualities, such as Steiner's anthroposophy, Blavatsky's theosophy, romantic transcendentalism, or spiritualism.

This turn towards non-institutionalised esotericism and spirituality outside the churches may have only increased over the last century. Since the 1960s, Thomas Luckmann (1967) argued, Christianity lost its monopoly on religion in the West, but this did not result in a secular, disenchanted society. It opened up a "market of ultimate significance" where those "who want to believe" behave like religious consumers. On the basis of "bricolage" of different religious traditions—Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, esotericism, occultism, paganism—they construct their own private form of religiosity. In a similar vein, many conspiracy theorists are involved in relentless "bricolage" of scientific and spiritual accounts in the "cultic milieu" (Campbell 2002) or today's "occulture" (Partridge 2005). In our study of the Dutch conspiracy milieu, a sub-group of conspiracy thinkers explicitly demonises the Christian church as a vast conspiracy ("lies, all lies!" and "It's all just politics") and turn to non-institutionalised spirituality: in addition to conspiracy theory, they read popular books like *The Celestine Prophecy* (James Redfield), *The Da Vinci Code* (Dan Brown) or *The 7 Spiritual Laws of Success* (Deepak Chopra); refer to "spiritual leaders" like Eckhart Tolle or Zecharia Sitchin; are practicing Reiki, Yoga, or Zen Meditation to find "inner peace" and are hence part of the wing involved in "New Age conspiracism" (Barkun 2006), "conspirituality" (Ward and Voas 2011), or "millennial conspiracism" (Robertson 2013, 2016). This middle-ground position of 'conspirituality', Ward and Voas explain, "appears to be a means by which political cynicism is tempered with spiritual optimism" (2011: 108). David Icke who is "exposing the dreamworld we believe to be real," is again an outstanding example.[2] Originally motivated by spiritual experiences in Peru in the 1990s, he developed a highly complex "superconspiracy" (Barkun, 2006)

2 http://www.davidicke.com/.

about countless, yet related malicious groups (that is, Illuminati, the Rothschilds, the Brotherhood, shape-shifting aliens) that construct a fake reality to alienate humanity from their real spiritual nature and, in doing so, strive for a New World Order (Robertson 2016). On the one hand, his work delves into dark and paranoid issue like "the Death of Bin Laden and other lies," "the fascist bloodline network," "shape-shifting, alien lizards," "global conspiracies," "mind programming," "brain washing," and "mass hypnosis" while it taps, on the other hand, into typical New Age themes such as "astrology," "healing," "infinite love," and a "spiritual awakening."

5.2 *Re-enchantment: From Nature to Society*

Notwithstanding this seemingly arbitrary and privatised 'bricolage', there are relatively stable, overarching themes in the milieu that are rooted in the long-standing Western esoteric traditions (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015; Dyrendal 2013; Robertson 2016) and address the problems of meaninglessness in a 'disenchanted' world. However, there is an important difference with esotericism: conspiracy theories are not so much constructing 'ultimate meaning' by attributing inherent meaning to nature, but rather, in a paradoxical way, to society.

The first assertion that characterises the mindset of conspiracy theories and esotericism is "nothing is what it seems" (Barkun 2006). This statement, like the others to follow, is typical for both discourses but, simultaneously, has a radically different meaning. New Age participants locate mysterious forces unambiguously in the natural world: in the universe, the earth, and all its manifestations. Nature is considered sacred: it contains an overpowering, yet invisible force or energy that permeates everything in the cosmos. This type of pantheistic spirituality is radically separated from society and modern culture. As Gordon Lynch argues: "The 'nature' that is being sacralised here is typically the natural order that exists outside the sphere of human cultural activity" and "the sacred natural order … is primarily the non-human order" (2007: 55). More than that, modern society is corrupting our contact with nature: institutions, bureaucracies, science, technology, and media alienate humans from contact with the nature outside and within the self—the "inner voice," the "higher self," "the divine spark" (Aupers and Houtman 2006; Heelas 1996; Roeland *et al.* 2010). Salvation lies in returning to the "healing" realm of (human) nature.

Conspiracy theorists share this critical analysis of modern society as corrupted and alienating to a certain extent and, indeed, those participants involved in 'conspirituality' seek spiritual salvation through a return to nature. And yet there's a crucial difference. Generally, conspiracy theorists re-locate mysterious forces from nature to modern society. Invisible, yet immensely

powerful forces are not so much located in the natural realm but in the institutional world—they are to be found in mysterious groups that are operating behind the cultural screens, underneath and beyond the empirical surface of modern life. Reality is always a staged reality that conceals the awful truth that evil agents are de facto controlling our lives. Conspiracy theorists are thus not so much trying to discover the underlying forces of nature but aim to uncover the hidden forces that control society. Herein lies personal salvation. This is often illustrated in the milieu by reference to films like *The Truman Show* (dir. Peter Weir, 1999), *ExistenZ* (dir. David Kronenberg 1999), or, most often, *The Matrix* (dir. Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999) where the protagonist hacker, Neo, discovers that everyday reality is in fact a virtual reality constructed by artificially intelligent robots:

> The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth…
>
> What truth?
>
> That you are a slave, Neo.
>
> *The Matrix*, 1999

The mysterious 'truth' or the underlying forces underneath empirical reality is not located in nature, but in society. And it is not a good, but an evil force. They may be AIs, shape-shifting aliens, mysterious Illuminati, Freemasons, Templars, the Bilderberg group, the CIA, FBI, NWO, or a sinister coalition between these, but such social groups are considered overpowering mysterious forces exerting radical control over everyday life. Assumptions such as these are a manifestation of ultimate meaning-making: they can be understood as self-constructed 'theodicies' explaining evil and suffering in the world.

Another assertion to which both spiritual believers and conspiracy theorists relate is "nothing happens by accident" (Barkun 2006). Spiritual seekers generally resist the modern assumption that the natural world is, essentially, devoid of meaning, direction, and intention. The process of evolution, for instance, may be typically understood by biologists as governed by contingency, and human existence therefore is a mere lucky accident. Spiritual seekers maintain that the evolution of life is motivated by an unfolding, spiritual logic, and moves towards a higher, spiritual goal in the future. This teleological assumption results in the concept of an imminent New Age of light, peace, and stability (Hanegraaff 1997). Interestingly, it is often argued in the milieu that the universe 'conspires' towards humans in a good and constructive way. There is

a positive cosmic intention that is sometimes called "pronoia" as the positive counterpart of "paranoia" (Zandbergen 2011). This implies that curious accidents should not be understood as accidental and should be read as, what Carl Gustav Jung called, "synchronicities": non-causal yet meaningful coincidences. In the narratives of conspiracy theorists, similar assumptions are made, but once again they generally do not apply to nature but to modern society. Whether we are talking about the attacks of 9/11, the assassination of JFK in 1963, or Princess Diana's car accident in 1997, conspiracy theorists believe that "Nothing happens by accident": they seek human intention where others find coincidence; they detect structure where others see chaos; they find meaning where others do not. Every detail may be a piece of evidence that leads them to a grand scheme or plot: "Conspiracy implies a world based on intentionality, from which accident and coincidence have been removed. Anything that happens occurs because it has been willed" (Barkun 2006: 3–4).

Finally, there is the common trope that "everything is connected"—a statement that, again, constitutes much of the discourse of spiritual seekers and conspiracy theorists. Spiritual seekers distinctly relate this statement to the natural world: it is an expression of their holistic worldview in which modern (Cartesian) dualism is rejected and the alleged connection between god and humans, nature and man, body and spirit is restored (Campbell, 2007; Hanegraaff 1997; Heelas 1996). In this holistic universe, a transcendent God is replaced by an immanent spiritual force that permeates everything. Humans are reconnected to the natural world once again, while alternative treatments—varying from Yoga, Reiki, or holistic 'healings'—approach individuals as an interconnected unity of 'body-mind-spirit'. Among conspiracy theorists the statement that "everything is connected" generally has a distinctly different meaning: instead of the holistic unity of nature, the adage points to the countless social connections, links, and coalitions that make up a global network of power. The "truth is out there," always just out of sight but, ultimately, "everything is connected." Spiritual seekers often point to personal experiences of 'interconnectedness' with nature as an important step in their "interpretive drift" (Luhrmann 1991) towards the holistic worldview (Aupers and Houtman 2006). Similar experiences may occur when conspiracy theorists actively "connect the dots" in contemporary society. As David Icke argues:

> Connect the dots. There are dots like banking, government, all these different things, 9/11, which in and of themselves are interesting. And you can see that something is not right. But when you connect the dots

> between apparently unconnected people, situations and organizations, that's when the tapestry appears and you go whooo. So that's what's happening.[3]

In summary, if we take these three discursive strategies of meaning-making into account it becomes quite difficult to deny that there is an affinity between religion and conspiracy theories. Recent authors have rightly pointed out the particular convergence between modern esotericism and conspiracy culture (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015; Robertson 2013, 2016; Ward and Voas 2011). Whereas modern esotericism locates invisible powers in nature, however, conspiracy theories relocate such forces generally to modern society. As Dyrendal points out in this respect: "conspiracy theory may take on the look of a modern esoteric discourse, preoccupied, perhaps, with social salvation rather than the divine" (2013: 221).

The proliferation of conspiracy theory, therefore, exemplifies a form of re-enchantment that is both unexpected from a Weberian perspective and undertheorised in the contemporary literature. Since the sixteenth century, Weber argued, institutions such as science, technology, politics, and economics are increasingly invested with instrumental rationality and, given the fact that they "master all things by calculation," contribute to a "disenchantment of the world" (Weber 1948: 139). We may question whether this analysis still holds. Particularly as a result of globalisation, institutions are often considered by citizens as totally "out of control" (Kelly 1994), "nontransparent" and "*stricto sensu* unrepresentable" (Žižek 2001: 19). In the words of Max Weber, nature may have been disenchanted by science and technology, but the modern institution is nowadays often considered a "mysterious incalculable force" itself (Weber 1948: 139). Evidently, this stimulates social imagination about 'the system': conspiracy theorists develop a plurality of theories about "what is really going on" within these institutions. They hence develop "cognitive maps" of what has become unrepresentable and address the true nature of opaque power in a globalising world (Jameson 1991). In claiming true knowledge about these mysterious powers, they re-enchant the world. To paraphrase Weber: by constructing theories about mysterious, omnipotent powers located in the institutions of modern society, they assert that the social world is essentially *not* "as it is"—"processes" do *not* "simply happen," but *do* "signify" *something* (1978: 506).

3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRs-ke4Il5Y.

6 Conclusion

Are conspiracy theories ultimately religious dogmas, unfounded claims based on blind faith and legitimated by crippled epistemologies? Or are we in fact dealing with highly sceptical citizens who distrust institutions, authorities, and experts, and deconstruct what they consider to be dogmatic truth claims produced by expert systems? In this chapter we tried to demonstrate that these two positions in the debate about conspiracy culture are common, but essentially informed by a political–moral agenda. Such claims often say more about those expressing them—their moral–political stance and epistemological preferences—than about conspiracy culture itself. Debating the (ir)rationality of conspiracy theories is taking sides in a conflict about true knowledge in a culture where epistemic authority is increasingly contested (Harambam, 2017). Reducing conspiracy culture to 'religion', we argued, is a form of 'boundary work' (Gieryn 1983). It is a discursive strategy of academics to label conspiracy theory as an irrational, primitive Other and, in doing so, they legitimate the superiority of the social sciences as a profession.

Our first suggestion for further research is, then, to study the ways in which the concept religion (with its connotations of "irrationality") is used in the debate about conspiracy theories. In this essay, we focused primarily on academics, but how has the portrayal of conspiracy theorists and their theories developed in the media over time? In what way are they labelled by journalists and politicians, and what role does the concept 'religion' play therein? Our second argument is that this stereotypical labelling of conspiracy theories and their advocates in academia obscures its hybrid character. The analysis showed that conspiracy theories tap into different discourses: it is an unstable, multi-faced phenomenon that can be located at the intersection of secular scepticism, social science, and spiritual salvation. We may consider these discourses as three ideal–typical positions on a continuum. A question for further research is if these different discourses appeal to different social groups in the conspiracy milieu: the full-fledged sceptics, doubting every dogma including their own assumptions about reality; the social activists and lay sociologists embracing theories related to modern alienation, stratification, and the global 'power elite'; and, finally, the esoteric–spiritual seeker striving for salvation. Another possibility is, of course, that individual participants combine all these different, often contradictory, elements in a syncretistic way. Through this "bricolage" (Luckmann 1967), conspiracy theorists transgress distinctions between scepticism and belief, science and religion, and disenchantment and re-enchantment. These domains are still radically opposed in the modern mindset

and this may provide yet another explanation as to why conspiracy theories are so fiercely attacked in academia. In much of his work, Bruno Latour (1993) has shown that "in-between categories" have always haunted the "modern divide" between object and subject, nature and culture, and science and religion that was constructed by the moral-political project of the Enlightenment. Increasingly, he argues, hybrids are proliferating in the public domain.

Conspiracy theories are good example of such hybrids. They proliferate in Western societies—in popular culture, on the Internet, through social media—and provide an alternative perspective on modern society for many citizens today. Notwithstanding the academic reflex to 'purify' these discourses and once again re-establish boundaries, the hybrid nature of conspiracy theories may explain their cultural appeal. In a secular, disenchanted cultural context, embracing the hybridity of conspiracy theories provides the possibility to embrace spiritual meaning, without 'falling back' on allegedly 'irrational' religious beliefs, dogmas, and rituals. And vice versa: it provides the opportunity to be sceptical and develop sociological theories about modern society in a 'scientific' way, while simultaneously constructing meanings about its supernatural causes and ultimate goals. Conspiracy theorists, from this perspective, exemplify a particular solution to the "problem of disenchantment" (Asprem 2014). Mixing up social science and esotericism and simultaneously assessing how the world 'is' and how it 'ought' to be in their 'research' may be a horror to academics, for conspiracy theorists it is having the best of both worlds.

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CHAPTER 3

Is a Belief in Providence the Same as a Belief in Conspiracy?

*Brian L. Keeley**

1 Introduction

Sometimes, Western theism explains events by reference to supernatural entities acting in ways unseen by, or largely unknown to, those of us in the world. Those supernatural entities—be they evil (Satan and his minions) or good (God and his Angels)—are attempting to execute a plan of which we mere mortals are only dimly aware, at best. Described this way, these explanations seem of a piece with secular conspiracy theories, which attempt to explain events in the world as being the result of the machinations of powerful, secretive organisations of conspirators. For example, the theory that US President John F. Kennedy was not assassinated by a lone gunman who got off a few lucky shots during a work break; he was killed as part of greater, more sinister, plan.

During the past half century or so, conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists have come in for unflattering evaluation, starting with Karl Popper's (1962) condemnation of 'the conspiracy theory of society', and continuing to this day. To be called a 'conspiracy theorist' is to be the victim of an insult in contemporary circles (see, for example, Sunstein 2014; Cassam 2016).

At this point, a number of questions arise: (1) What are the affinities between theological and conspiratorial explanatory frameworks? (2) Is conspiracy theorising deservedly besmirched, as is commonly thought? (3) If there are important similarities between these explanatory frameworks and if conspiracy theorising is epistemically dubious, are the problems for conspiracy theories similarly problematic for such religious explanation? In this chapter, I will direct my attention primarily to the first question and argue that there

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is value in comparing and contrasting the two frameworks of explanation. Each helps to illuminate strategies of explanation used by the other. I will have less to say about the second question, but will point the reader in the direction of work that seeks to demonstrate that determining precisely where and how conspiracy theories go wrong, epistemically speaking, is not as easy as is commonly assumed.

To get at my approach to the third question, consider the following line of argument somebody might be tempted to propose, after noticing a similarity between religious and conspiracy theorising: there are many similarities between religious explanations and the explanations favoured by conspiracy theorists, for example, they both present explanations that depend heavily on unseen forces at play. Further, we know that secular conspiracy theories are epistemically vicious (or, at the very least, foolish). Therefore, to the extent that certain theological explanatory strategies share features with secular conspiracy theories, we can conclude that such religious explanations are epistemically suspicious. I argue that it is inappropriate to tar religious explanation with the brush of conspiracy theory, or vice versa. Primarily, I argue that this is not because of dissimilarities between the two cases, but rather that both are, in fact, similar and required to overcome challenges that other frameworks of explanation, such as scientific explanation, often do not.

That said, it is far from obvious what the connections are between certain kinds of secular conspiracy theories and certain kinds of religious explanations of worldly events. (As I will spell out below, I believe it is a mistake to make broad, sweeping, *general* claims about *all* instances of conspiracy or religious explanation.) Indeed, in many ways the two explanatory approaches seem to be worlds apart. So, a big part of my goal in this chapter will be to come to a better understanding of the nature of different domains of explanation and, in the process, come to a better understanding of the nature of epistemic justification in those various domains.

2 The Credibility of Miracles and Some Initial Groundwork

To draw the connection between conspiracy theories and religion, I wish to begin with what might seem to be off-topic: the concept of miracles. However, starting with this case will let me lay out some useful distinctions and concepts that will pay off later in the chapter. So, I will begin with David Hume's famous analysis of the epistemic credibility of miracles reported via testimony.

In Section X of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume explores the limits of testimony as a source of knowledge by looking at a particularly extreme example of a phenomenon that we are called upon to evaluate: miracles. Hume asks the question: Is any amount of testimonial evidence, of whatever high quality, ever sufficient to render credible a claim in favor of the truth of a genuine miracle?[1]

Miracles occupy an extreme position because they are not merely improbable events, but rather events that run counter to everything we have come to expect about the nature of the world and how it works. So, it is no miracle that a seemingly healthy person should all of a sudden fall ill and die because such an event is known to happen, albeit rarely. But for somebody to be for all appearances dead for several days (confirmed by careful and expert medical examination), as a result of grievous injury or torture, to suddenly jump up as though never injured verges on that which is never witnessed. On the principle that the more wondrous the claim the greater evidence required to render it rationally believable, Hume argues that miracles are events so striking and counter-to-experience that no amount of testimony can render them credible. There will always be other—*non-miraculous*—explanations that will be better warranted, such as that the testimony in favour of the alleged miracle is simply innocently mistaken or intentionally deceptive.

In other words, on Hume's analysis, the very thing that gives a claim the property of being miraculous simultaneously renders it literally incredible. This, in turn, renders the entire class of miracles beyond epistemic warrant, *a priori*. This does not necessarily mean we have no grounds for believing in the truth of miracles, only that we can have no rational grounds. We can still come to believe irrationally; we can choose to have faith in the truth of miracles. If Hume is right about miracles then, by definition, the only way to come to know the truth of miracles is by faith, but that would require accepting non-rational grounds for legitimate knowledge.

One point of comparison between miracles and conspiracies is that both often focus on singular, often highly unusual, events that seem by their nature to call for 'big' explanations. People being healed of serious illness by a single touch or the assassination of popular, if controversial, US presidents seem to call out for something far greater than mundane explanations. They, to some, call for explanations involving powerful forces beyond the normal

1 Hume seems to wish to restrict his discussion of the credibility of miracles to testimonial evidence. What of allegedly miraculous events one personally witnesses? Should these be analysed in a different manner? Perhaps, but quite quickly one will have to rely on the 'testimony' of one's memory of the event and might well be back in a very similar epistemic situation.

ken. Similarly, such grand events, if they are going to be considered to be fakes or hoaxes, would require pretty significant efforts to have pulled off such a lie, and this would point in the direction of some other conspiracy, such as a conspiracy to make someone look like they had supernatural powers or to have lined up numerous 'crisis actors' to falsely testify as to what they witnessed. Explanations in terms of either miracles or conspiracies rarely seemed called for in the case of everyday events.[2]

I am more interested here in a second point of comparison between miracles and conspiracy theories. It is tempting to ask whether such a 'Humean analysis' can be successfully carried out on them. It would be a nice and tidy outcome if it were found to be the case that a defining feature of genuine conspiracy theories renders them literally incredible. This would go some ways towards justifying the disdain in which many seem to hold conspiracy theories. If we can know that no amount of evidence could ever warrant belief in such theories, then we could conclude that we can know, *a priori,* that belief in them is irrational.

Unfortunately, such a Humean analysis of conspiracy theories is elusive. To see why, let us begin by defining conspiracy theory in a straightforward way: a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons acting in secret.[3] Defined thus, there are clearly many conspiracy theories that almost everybody would agree have significant epistemic merit, such as the commonly-accepted theories concerning the Nixon Administration involvement in the 1974 Watergate Building break-in, the Reagan Administration involvement in the mid-1980s Iran-Contra Affair, or the plot responsible for the assassination of Julius Caesar. Politics, diplomacy, business, crime—indeed, much of the social world—are rife with conspiracy, and so often the best explanation of social events will invoke conspiracies. In contrast to such cases where it seems eminently reasonable to believe in conspiratorial explanations, there are others where the epistemic grounds seem far less solid: that NASA never landed humans on the moon and hired director Stanley Kubrick to fake the television footage beamed around the world in 1969, that there exists a secretive group known as the Illuminati, including popular entertainers and powerful politicians who exert control over many aspects of the world, that the April 19, 1995, Oklahoma City bombing was not the work of Timothy McVeigh

2 My thanks to Egil Asprem for suggesting this point of comparison.

3 This is how I define the term in Keeley (1999).

and friends working alone, but instead involved a larger plot carried out by the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.[4]

Given that belief in *some* conspiracies seems *prima facie* warranted, whereas other theories fall elsewhere on the spectrum of epistemic warrant, we seem to be faced with what Buenting and Taylor term a "particularist view" of conspiracy theories. According to their useful distinction:

> [On] the *generalist view*, the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories. On this view, conspiratorial thinking *qua* conspiracy thinking is itself irrational. The *particularist view* about conspiratorial thinking denies that the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories.
>
> BUENTING and TAYLOR 2010: 568–569; emphases in original

The Humean analysis of the epistemology of miracles discussed above is a generalist account; Hume argues that, due to their very nature as miracles, the entire class of miracles are literally incredible. A Humean analysis of conspiracy theories would be to take a generalist view and that path does not seem available to the would-be *conspiracy theory theorist*, to use a bit of useful terminology from Dentith (2014).[5] Some conspiracy theories turn out to be true and belief in them is warranted, so a generalist rejection of conspiracy theories akin to Hume's generalist rejection of miracles does not seem to be available.

3 Providential Theorising

Let's now move from miracles to what I believe represents a more interesting line of theological explanation that connects with secular conspiracy theories in more fruitful ways. I am thinking of the habit of characterising many or

4 I explore this last example in significant detail in Keeley 1999. Note that this case involves a common feature of events about which conspiracy theories abound: Even the 'official story', in this case the explanation given by US Federal investigators that led to a successful death penalty conviction, involved a conspiracy. In many such cases, the question is not *whether* an event is best explained by a conspiracy theory, but rather *which* conspiracy theory of the many proffered is the most highly warranted.

5 The term is defined pretty much as one would expect: Conspiracy theory theories are attempts to explain and understand the social phenomenon of conspiracy theories and a conspiracy theory theorist is one, such as myself, who traffics in such theories (see Dentith 2014: Ch. 2).

most events in religious terms. This is a mainstay of Western (especially US) news coverage; whenever there is some great tragedy or disaster it is common to present a witness or commentator opining that the event in question was God's will or that it can be explained as being part of God's plan. The first point of comparison, admittedly offhand, is the observation that just as invoking conspiracy theories is looked down upon by some in the culture (particularly by those who consider themselves well educated), such religious explanations are often looked down upon by those that do not share them (quite often the same group of people in both cases).

In this chapter, the primary example of a theological conspiracy will be the notion of a Divine plan, as invoked in the previous paragraph. Boethius describes this notion in his sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy* (1999) as "Providence." In Book III of that work, he identifies the constant, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God as that towards which we ought to aim in order to achieve true happiness—as opposed to the pursuit of fame, wealth, health, power, and the other fickle trappings of worldly fortune (the topic of Book II). At that point, in Book IV, he confronts a version of the classic Problem of Evil. If the world is truly guided by such a perfect being as described in Book III, why does the world He oversees contain so much pain and suffering, for example, why is it that the devout and upright Boethius himself is writing his work while awaiting a death sentence for an alleged treason he did not commit? Boethius' answer is a classic one in the history of Judeo-Christian-Islamic thought: there is no such thing as evil. What we mortal humans call 'evil' is not genuinely evil at all. It is a kind of illusion that results from our necessarily myopic and limited perspective on the world. What we call evil is, from the Divine perspective, that which is good and necessary in the 'bigger picture'. This apparent evil is all part of God's plan (Providence). If we knew or could comprehend Providence, we would see the real (and good) reason behind everything that happens.[6]

The notion that there exists a secret plan for the world that we witness bears at least a passing similarity to what philosopher Lee Basham describes as "global conspiracies" (2002). He kicks off his essay on the topic by asking us to imagine that select members of the Council on Foreign Relations, or the Freemasons, Trilateral Commission members, the Bilderbergers or the Illuminati

6 The alert reader, at this point, might notice one important implication of Boethius' solution to the problem of evil is that it generates a *further* philosophical problem, namely the Problem of Free Will: If everything that happens is necessarily part of God's plan, how can it be that we have any free choice as we act in the world? Boethian Providence would seem to leave no room for freedom of the will. Never fear, Boethius recognises this problem and offers a solution in the final Book V of the *Consolation*.

are the "secret masters of the planet" (91).[7] Continuing, he asks us to "Imagine the 'world' as we know it today is an elaborate *hoax*" (92; emphasis in original). Where Boethius presents the world-as-we-witness-it as a kind of illusion, Basham's explicit discussion is of a globally conspired world as a hoax. Illusion, hoax, call it what you will but on both accounts, what we see is not the world as it truly is, and that 'true world' is in the hands of somebody other than us.

I want to go further and explore some notable points of comparison between explanations of events in terms of secular conspiracies and explanations that invoke supernatural causes and the intervention of supernatural agents.[8] For example, both call for the explanation of events in terms of intentional agents; in particular, intentional agents that are not readily available for interrogation. In both cases, the motives of the proposed agents are hidden from those of us who experience the results of the behind-the-scenes activities. Further, the avenues available to those who might want to confirm or disconfirm both kinds of explanation are importantly different from strategies available in the exploration of empirical explanations, such as those that are found within science.

An examination of proposed 'supernatural conspiracies' will immediately indicate some interesting differences between them and run-of-the-mill theories about secular conspiracies. Nonetheless, there are sufficient similarities, I believe, to make such a comparison fruitful.

4 Disanalogies: Lone Gunmen and Nefariousness

The first thing that comes to mind when thinking of God as a conspirator is that it would seem that God's being a singular agent disqualifies theological actors from being genuinely conspiratorial. After all, the Latin origins of our contemporary English word 'conspire' point to the sharing of breath: 'con' = with, together; 'spire' (from the Latin *spirare*) = to breathe. The image invoked by the etymology here is of multiple persons whispering with their heads close together. Further, we often distinguish conspiracies from the activities of agents acting on their own. It is a conspiracy if members of organised crime or the C.I.A. colluded to assassinate President Kennedy in 1963; however, if Lee Harvey Oswald acted on his own, that would be different. A lone gunman does

7 Basham actually writes "secret *malevolent* masters" (my emphasis), but I will discuss the role of malevolence in conspiracy theories below.

8 I originally explored these themes in a 2007 article entitled "God as the ultimate conspiracy theory." The present chapter should be considered a further development of the ideas I initially explored there.

not constitute a 'conspiracy'. Therefore, if God acts on his own, through Providence, that would not seem to be a conspiracy any more than the official story of the Warren Commission Report that Oswald acted on his own.

There are two things that can be said in response to this concern. First, etymology aside, it can be argued that the existence of a secret goal is more central to the concept of a conspiracy than the existence of multiple agents. It is just that for humans to successfully carry out secret plans against other humans—that is, when the match-up of powers between opponents is roughly equal—greater power can be brought to bear by multiple parties. The only way humans can carry on the kind of interesting and noteworthy conspiracies that motivate and worry conspiracy theorists is by acting in concert with others. Even somebody as powerful as a Bill Gates or a President Nixon would need to operate as part of, or to lead, a larger conspiracy in order to have a significant effect on the world. God, on the other hand, is by hypothesis omnipotent. As a result, He has no need to conspire with anybody to bring about Providence according to His wishes. Therefore, I suggest that our normal definition of a conspiracy is relativised to non-omnipotent agents. Even an extremely powerful—but nonetheless finitely powerful—agent (for example, Satan) would seem to need to act as part of a conspiracy to carry out significant events in the world. An omnipotent agent would be a special case.

Second, it is worth noting that God, as described in the Bible, actually seldom works alone. His messages are carried by angels (sometimes relayed through prophets). His pronounced destructions are often carried out by angels or other agents. It is true that there are many things that are attributed to His knowledge alone—but even that might only make Him the mastermind of the "conspiracy" carried out by his minions.[9]

Another source of difference between conspiracy theories as normally understood and possible supernatural parallels is that conspiracy theories are typically known for their nefarious quality. Generally speaking, conspirators are up to no good; indeed, that is a primary reason for the secrecy. If they attempted their work in public, the Good People would intervene to stop them. Given that one of the traditional features of the monotheistic deity is His omnibenevolence, this seems like another source of disagreement in the comparison of our two cases.

Again, a few different things can be said in response. First, it is far from clear that malice is a central, rather than a peripheral, feature of conspiracies. It may be true that the conspiracy theories that get us worked up and concerned

9 Thanks to James Griffith for suggesting this line of argument.

are of the nefarious variety, but that the phenomenon of conspiracy is more general. Since we aren't too bothered by secret activity that brings about positive outcomes or which are done with good intentions, there does not seem to be a need to single them out with a special term. If I am correct in this, when we commonly think of conspiracy theories, we are implicitly pointing at nefarious ones. But, nefariousness is not the only reason why secrecy might be desired by a group of individuals. For example, the element of surprise often requires secrecy and not all surprises are nefarious, be it a surprise birthday party arranged (in secret) by friends or the surprise of children on Christmas morning or after a visit by the Tooth Fairy arranged (in secret) by parents and other family members. (Consider how often older children are brought into the conspiracy so as not to spoil the fun of younger siblings.) Similarly, sometimes individuals act in secret to avoid *praise*, rather than blame, as when a group of wealthy individuals seek to do good work—funding orphanages, children's hospitals, or food banks—anonymously.

Another response is to try and reconstrue the nature of the negative feature here. Some (for example, Clarke 2002: 138) have noted that 'nefariousness' seems too strong a requirement. My response is to follow Pigden (2006: 157), who argues that an important proviso on the definition of conspiracy theories is that the conspiracies they posit must at least be morally suspect, although not necessarily morally wrong. This proviso allows us to include what Hume called 'conspiracies for the public interest' or what we might more generally refer to as 'conspiracies of goodness'.[10] There may be nothing wrong with a group of wealthy Good Samaritans secretly funding their local orphanage; however, democratic societies generally emphasise the importance of transparency. As such, secret action itself can raise the presumption of immoral action, even if, in fact, nothing bad is intended (a topic explored in Mahmud 2014: Ch. 5). Even if one likes and trusts one's local governing board, one might reasonably insist on their holding only open meetings.

If anything qualifies as a 'conspiracy of goodness', then one imagines Providence does! At the same time, the whole point of presenting Providence is to present it as the opposite of morally wrong. Nonetheless, it qualifies as morally suspect, especially to those of us mere mortals who are in the position of trying

10 The phrase 'conspiracies for the public interest' appears in the posthumously published essay "Of the Immortality of the Soul" (1798), which Hume had originally planned to publish in 1756 as part of a work to be entitled *Five Dissertations.* But the publisher got cold feet over the possible reaction, including threatened litigation, to some of the perceived attacks on religious doctrine contained therein.

to figure out why bad things happen to good people. That the world apparently contains evil necessarily renders suspect any plan that involves these events; after all, the philosophical issue here is called the *problem* of evil, so there is at least a *prima facie* case for a wrong.

If I am correct in my reasoning in this section, the potential disanalogies between secular conspiracy theories and supernatural theories akin to what is suggested by the notion of Divine Providence are not definitive in showing that the two cases are too unalike to be profitably compared. There are differences, indeed, but (as I often find myself stressing to my undergraduate students) simply demonstrating that there is a difference between two analogised cases does not, on its own, demonstrate the fallaciousness of the proposed analogy; indeed, it is part of the essence of analogies that there exist differences between the two analogised things. If there were no differences, one would not have a relationship of 'analogy'; one would have an *identity*. What is needed to undermine the fruitfulness of an analogy is to show that such differences make a difference to the point at hand. My suggestion here is that the differences indicated in this section do not rise to that level.

5 Analogies: Verification and Falsification

Despite the differences discussed above, there are a number of ways in which Divine Providence seems to share much with cases of secular conspiracies. This is particularly the case concerning important elements of their epistemic situations. Primary among these is that in both cases, there exist worries revolving around verification and falsifiability. For example, it has been observed that one interesting feature of secular conspiracy theories is that evidence against them is often taken by their proponents to be, in fact, evidence *for* them. If a particularly telling datum arises that appears to undermine a given theory, the conspiracy theorist might reply, "You see? That just shows how much the conspirators want us to not believe in their guilt (as well as showing their power of manipulation)!"

Given such responses it is reasonable to worry that conspiracy theories are unfalsifiable in philosopher of science, Karl Popper's (1959) sense of the term. The theories are constructed such that they cannot be refuted by any possible evidence. Supernatural conspiracy theories apparently share this feature. What possible evidence could demonstrate that there was *not* a Divine Plan lying behind the events of the world? Consider a related sentiment, expressed

in 1869 by poet Charles Baudelaire who offers us the words from an unnamed (and likely fictional) preacher's sermon: "My beloved brothers, never forget when you hear people boast of our progress in enlightenment, that one of the devil's best ruses is to persuade you that he does not exist!" (1970: 61)[11] What Baudelaire's preacher likely has in mind is that one result of the Age of Enlightenment's rational inquiry into the existence of the Devil is a lack of evidence of this being's existence, and that the resulting conclusion that he does not exist is precisely the result the Devil desires.

Lack of falsifiability might well be a characteristic shared between secular and theological conspiracy theories. But is this lack of falsifiability a problem, *per se*? Popper introduces falsifiability as part of his attempt to respond to the problem of demarcation in philosophy of science; that is, to answer the question of what distinguishes genuinely scientific theories from non-scientific ones. According to Popper, what marks scientific explanations as different from other, non-scientific ones is that scientific theories make risky predictions that might well turn out (on investigation) to be false. A successful scientific explanation, according to Popper is one that makes risky predictions, has been investigated, and has not been falsified. This feature is what makes Einstein's General Theory of Relativity different from explanations offered by psychoanalysis, say, where it seems that any behaviour observed in a patient can be read as supporting the analytic diagnosis of the analyst.[12] Comparing the two cases, Magee explains Popper's reaction:

> Other theories which were claimed to be scientific and were at the height of intellectual fashion in the Vienna of Popper's youth, such as those of Freud and Adler, did not, and could not be made to, put their lives at stake in [the way Einstein's theories had been put to the test in 1919 by Arthur Eddington's solar eclipse expedition]. No conceivable observations could contradict them. They would explain whatever occurred (though differently). And Popper saw that their ability to explain everything, which so convinced and excited their adherents, was precisely what was most wrong with them.
>
> MAGEE 1973: 37–38

11 An updated version of this idea can be found in the 1995 film, *The Usual Suspects*: "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he did not exist."

12 Popper's experience working with the Viennese analyst, Alfred Adler, and how that experience contributed to the development of his understanding of science is discussed in Popper (2002: Ch. 1).

On the one hand, Popper's criterion of demarcation is fine in light of our discussion, if neither theology nor conspiracy theories are intended as scientific explanations. On the other hand, Popper does not just say that the inability to be falsified renders Freud and Adler's theories non-scientific; he says that it makes them, in some robust sense, wrong. Does Popper's concept of falsifiability indicate that there is something wrong with conspiracy theories, be they secular or theological?

I do not think so. My reason is that Popper's account of theoretical explanation points to an important difference between the domains targeted for explanation by the different theories here. I would argue that lack of falsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we are not investigating the alleged activity of agents that, by hypothesis, have the power to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter. In the domain of natural science, the target of investigation is generally not an agent aware of our investigations and in a position to lead us astray. Eddington did not need to worry that the stars he was measuring during the solar eclipse of 1919 might voluntarily move, so as to thwart his attempt to test Einstein's theory. But Baudelaire's Devil is not so oblivious to our inquiries—quite the opposite is true!

The situations investigated by secular and theological conspiracy theories are closer in nature to the explanations within criminal contexts. Indeed, it is no accident that criminal conspiracies are a commonplace phenomenon. It would be a pretty poor homicide detective who accepted proffered alibis at face value and who was blind to the possibility of planted evidence and attempts to frame others for crimes. The standard of evidence will no doubt be higher for a prosecutor who must take the detective's results and present a theory of the crime to the court, but even at this stage, a good prosecutor will treat as advisorial, and innocently misconstrued or possibly mendacious, the testimony presented by the witnesses called by the defence. *Mutatis mutandis* for the defence attorney. In American courts at least, the point is for the prosecutor to present a case that is supported by a preponderance of the evidence or beyond a reasonable doubt (depending on the trial type), not beyond *all* possible doubt, and part of this is relativised to the human context and human foibles. The upshot here is that it may be the case that there is a degree of non-falsifiability in conspiracy theories of all stripes, but it would be too flat-footed to read this, on its own, as damning evidence against the plausibility of such explanations.

As it happens, Popper is perhaps the first 20th-century philosopher to discuss the epistemic problems of conspiracy theories. In a short discussion in his *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1962), Popper warns against what he

derides as 'the conspiracy theory of society'; that is, the tendency to explain the events of history by (perhaps unfalsifiable) reference to the mysterious machinations of off-stage plotters. It is much more likely, Popper argues, that such events are better explained as unintended cock-ups, because the conspirators required for explanations would need to be nearly God-like in their powers to have successfully carried off their alleged plans. Pigden nicely characterises the situation:

> Popper's own remarks reinforce this line of criticism. According to Popper, the conspiracy theory is the secularised version of a religious belief. The idea that what goes on in the world is due to the machinations of the men of power is the secular successor to the view that events are controlled by the conspiracies of the gods. Popper explicitly cites the gods of Homer in this connection—but the Homeric gods whose intrigues determine the events before Troy are divided into factions that try to frustrate each other's plans. The outcome is not always what either side intends. Thus the secularized successor to this system of Divine intervention can hardly be Popper's conspiracy theory in which every (significant) event is what some set of conspirators planned to happen. The post-Homeric conspiracy theory would deliver us over to the tender mercies of rival groups of plotters whose schemes could be as disastrous when they did not succeed as when they did. We would not just be as flies to wanton boys. We would be as flies to wanton boys who got into gang fights and visited us with the unintended consequences of their actions (when they attacked each other with fly spray, for instance). (1995: 7–8)

That said, there is another, related worry about both secular and theological conspiracy theories. The flip-side of the worry that such theories are not falsifiable is the worry that they cannot be verified. Setting aside the worry about whether any conceivable evidence could refute a conspiracy theory, we can ask whether any evidence could definitely confirm a conspiracy theory. In the case of secular conspiracy theories, the answer to this question seems quite clearly to be "yes." The Watergate burglars were caught in the act of carrying out their conspiracy and their confessions and other evidence—famously (and apocryphally) captured by the phrase, "Follow the money!"—led investigators into the hallowed halls of the White House. As in this case, presumably a group confession by the hit team behind the assassination of JFK or the demolition team who planted the explosives in the World Trade Center complex on 9/11 would similarly confirm that the conspiracy theorists were right all along.

Is the same thing true of the kinds of Providential or other supernatural conspiracy theories being considered here? I find it hard to imagine—because of his alleged supernatural powers—Satan allowing himself being perp-walked into a police station, with a jacket over his head and his hands cuffed behind his back; this seems like another point of disanalogy between the two kinds of conspiracy theorising.

This worry that theological claims are not verifiable has been a concern within philosophy of religion since at least the rise of Logical Positivism in the period following World War I. This issue was considered important because verification was proposed by philosophers in this tradition as a condition for meaningfulness. As John Hick aptly describes the history, prior to these philosophers,

> it was generally assumed that in order to become accepted as true a proposition need only pass one test, a direct examination as to its truth or falsity. The positivists instituted another qualifying examination that a proposition must pass before it can even compete for the Diploma of Truth. This previous examination is concerned with whether or not a proposition is meaningful. "Meaningful" in this context is a logical term; not a psychological term, as when we speak of a "very meaningful experience" or say of something that "it means a lot to me." To say that a proposition has meaning or, more strictly (as became evident in the discussions of the 1930s and 1940s), that it has factual or cognitive meaning, is to say that it is in principle verifiable, or at least "probabilifiable," by reference to human experience. This means, in effect, that its truth or falsity must make some possible experienceable difference. If its truth or falsity makes no difference that could possibly be observed, the proposition is cognitively meaningless; it does not embody a factual assertion.
>
> HICK 1983: 94–95

For those positivist philosophers, theological claims such as the kinds of supernatural conspiracy theories I have been discussing here—as with much of mainstream metaphysics—were 'not even wrong', as the complaint goes. The very supernatural caste of such claims—such as the appeal to a Divine Conspirator 'behind the scenes' of our world—would seem to place them beyond the realm of verification, and hence beyond the realm of meaningfulness.

However, such a conclusion is too fast, and seeing how demonstrates another point of similarity (rather than dissimilarity) between theological and secular conspiracy theories. It may be true that verification is not available to us at

the moment and with the epistemic resources currently at hand, but that is not to say that there is no conceivable evidence that could verify such theories. In the case of secular conspiracy theories, the theorist bemoans their lack of resources, resources that could conceivably uncover the nefarious deeds of the conspirators behind 9/11 or the JFK assassination or the moon landing hoax.

The lack of epistemic resources in the case of theological conspiracies is illustrated in what Hick calls "eschatological verificationism" (1983: 100–106; see also Hick 1977). The idea is best presented in a long parable presented in Hick (1957):

> Two men are traveling together along a road. One of them believes that it leads to a Celestial City, the other that it leads nowhere; but since it is the only road there is, they must both travel it. Neither has been this way before, and neither is able to say what they will find around each next corner. During their journey they meet both with moments of refreshment and delight and with moments of hardship and danger. All the time one of them thinks his journey as a pilgrimage to the Celestial City and interprets the pleasant stretches as encouragements and the obstacles as trials of his purpose and lessons in endurance prepared by the King of that City and designed to make of him a worthy citizen of the place when at last he arrives there. The other believes none of this and sees their journey as an unavoidable and aimless ramble. Since he has no choice in the matter he enjoys the good stretches and endures the bad. But for him there is no Celestial City to be reached, no all-encompassing purpose ordaining their journey; only the road itself and the luck of the road in good weather and bad. …[W]hen they do turn the last corner it will be apparent that one of them has been right all the time and the other wrong. (150–151)

As described in the parable here, that the two individuals do not have the resources to verify their claims during the course of their life does not mean that their situation cannot conceivably change (at the point of death). Conceivably then, if an afterlife exists as the endpoint of the great plan of Providence, then it could be revealed at that point.[13] In this way, Hick argues that the properties of falsification and verification can pull apart. In cases such as claims about the

13 Here, I cannot help but think of Rowan Atkinson's classic skit "The Devil welcomes you to Hell," in which the British comedian stands on stage playing the part of the Devil ("You can call me 'Toby' "), who begins by splitting up the host of individuals into various groups. After asking the atheists to gather off to one side, Toby says to them, "You must be feeling a right bunch of nitwits!"

existence of an afterlife (especially if it is not universally shared), there may be the possibility of verification, even if it would not necessarily be falsifiable. That I do not experience an afterlife is not strong evidence that you will not have one, as it is a different case.

6 Conclusion

I hope that what I have been able to show in this chapter is that comparing and contrasting the cases of a particular strand of theological explanation and secular conspiracy explanation helps us understand both of these interesting phenomena more deeply. Boethius's answer to the problem of evil, which postulates a Providential divine plan of God, still has resonance today, often in Protestant Christian theological contexts. (Perhaps anachronistically, since Boethius lived and wrote a full millennium prior to the birth of the Reformation.) This explanation strategy bears at least a *prima facie* similarity to secular conspiracy theories, which explain the events of the world (assassinations, moon landings, terrorist attacks, election outcomes, and the like) by reference to actions by powerful actors behind the scene.

On the one hand, there are nonetheless differences between such secular and supernatural explanations, but I attempted to show that the differences that there are do not make a difference to the epistemic logic at play in such domains. On the other, both kinds of explanation posit their unseen causes for similar reasons; both propose that there is reason to believe that there are agents who both wish to work in secrecy and who are in a powerful enough position to pull it off. Against such a backdrop, traditional standards for explanation revolving around falsification and verification developed for the sciences (where one's explanatory target is not an agent interested in the outcome of one's investigation) do not apply in quite the same ways.

Lacking generalist, *a priori* grounds for rendering the same epistemic judgment on the justification of conspiracy theories, we are left with particularism. We have to take each conspiracy theory separately and render independent judgments on the merit of each (often after conducting investigation or taking in the reports of other investigators). As we saw, Hume argues we can be generalists about explanations in terms of miracles and declare them incredible. But due to its similarities with conspiracy theories, we seem to be forced to be more particularist with respect to explanations in terms of Divine providence, although if John Hick's eschatological verificationism argument has merit, the truth or falsehood of the Divine plan is not so much investigated as it is revealed to us (or not) in the final moment.

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CHAPTER 4

Are Conspiracy Theories a Surrogate for God?

Michael Wood and Karen Douglas

1 Introduction

In recent decades, the decline of traditional religion in the West has been matched by a rise in the visibility of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories seem to fulfil some of the psychological needs addressed by religion, such as imposing a sense of order and agency upon the seemingly random and capricious world. Some of the same underlying psychological dispositions, such as cognitive style and probabilistic reasoning ability, appear to give rise to both. Moreover, many conspiracy beliefs have parallels in content and structure to religious beliefs: some propose an Edenic existence that was ended only by the interference of a conspiring group, while others anticipate an apocalyptic catastrophe that will be either brought about or welcomed by a cabal eager to see the end of civilisation as we know it. These patterns have led some scholars to question whether conspiracy theories are, in some sense, a replacement for religious belief in an increasingly secular society. In this chapter, we present an initial examination of this question from a primarily psychological perspective, examining the parallels between conspiratorial and religious belief systems and discussing the extent to which they complement and contradict one another.

Psychologists have taken a scientific interest in religion since at least the early 20th century, when William James's publication of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) made the case for investigating religious experiences as one might study any other human experience. Interest in conspiracy theories is rather more recent; only in the wake of the John F. Kennedy assassination did psychologists begin to investigate why people differ in the degree to which they think the world is run by secretive conspiracies (Hamsher *et al.* 1968). Well before the systematic study of the psychology of conspiracy theories began, though, there was speculation that conspiracy theories and religions might have similar psychological causes—that conspiracy theories can be thought of as a sort of secular religion. Popper, writing on grand conspiracy theories in which all significant events are secretly planned by unseen agents of near-omnipotent power, noted that there is little epistemic difference between such conspirators and "the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain

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the history of the Trojan War" (1945: 294). According to this perspective, conspiracy theories are therefore 'the secularization of a religious superstition'; a surrogate, perhaps, for God.

The idea of conspiracy theories as a sort of religion (or a replacement for religion) has proven influential (Coady 2006; Franks *et al.* 2013). While there have been few attempts to synthesise the psychology of conspiracy with the psychology of religion, there are indeed some instructive parallels between the two. Research on the psychological phenomenon of compensatory control indicates that beliefs in conspiracy theories (Whitson and Galinsky 2008) and religious beliefs (Kay *et al.* 2010) are both strengthened by threatening events that prompt uncertainty. In this sense, they are both thought to function as a way of affirming that the world is a place that can be known and controlled. Both types of belief may also be related to judgements of the world as a fundamentally just or unjust place, where people either do (or do not) get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Rubin and Peplau 1975). Religious belief and conspiracy belief are both more likely among people with certain patterns of cognitive style and reasoning ability (Brotherton and French 2014; Gervais and Norenzayan 2012). Finally, researchers have speculated that both successful religious beliefs and successful conspiracy theories possess the quality of minimal counterintuitivity—of being just unusual enough to be memorable without being so unusual as to be completely implausible (Franks *et al.* 2013). This is visible in both the thematic parallels between conspirators and more supernatural agents and in the symbiotic relationship between the content of religion and conspiracy theories. In general, both types of belief seem to occur among similar people and in similar situations, and to involve broadly similar content, though they also diverge in some important ways.

2 Detection of Patterns and Agency

Both religious belief and belief in conspiracy theories are thought to emanate from a general human tendency toward detecting patterns and agency in nature. That is, people are hard-wired to look for instances of cause and effect in the world, or to detect the influence of other actors when seeking to explain events around them (Kelley 1973; Douglas *et al.* 2016). By this account, when a threatening event has no obvious cause, or an ostensible cause that is not psychologically satisfying in some way, people attribute it to the intervention of supernatural beings or to a conspiracy of near-supernatural power (McCauley and Jacques 1979; Leman and Cinnirella 2007, 2013). For example, when the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami devastated Indonesia and the

surrounding nations, there was no shortage of claims that the disaster was caused by something other than unpredictable shifting of the Earth's tectonic plates. Some explained the disaster as an act of punishment by a vengeful God (Paul and Nadiruzzaman 2013), while others claimed that the Indian, Israeli, or US governments conspired to cause the tsunami via underwater nuclear detonations or advanced electromagnetic weaponry (Sheaffer 2005). In 2011, when an earthquake in Japan precipitated another tsunami and a large-scale nuclear disaster, both divinity and conspiracy were again invoked to explain what others saw as a random tragedy (Dwyer 2011; Huff 2011). In both of these cases, a disaster produced by the inscrutable forces of nature was instead attributed to an invisible, powerful agent acting deliberately on a particular motive. William James, the first psychologist to study religion, wrote of an earthquake which he could not help but perceive as the product of deliberate agency:

> Animus and intent were never more present in any human action, nor did any human activity ever more definitely point back to a living agent as its source and origin. All whom I consulted on the point agreed as to this feature in their experience. "It expressed intention," "It was vicious," "It was bent on destruction," "It wanted to show its power," or what not. To me, it wanted simply to manifest the full meaning of its name. But what was this "It"? To some, apparently, a vague demonic power; to me an individualized being … One informant interpreted it as the end of the world and the beginning of the final judgment. This was a lady in a San Francisco hotel, who did not think of its being an earthquake till after she had got into the street and some one had explained it to her. She told me that the theological interpretation had kept fear from her mind, and made her take the shaking calmly. For "science," when the tensions in the earth's crust reach the breaking-point, and strata fall into an altered equilibrium, earthquake is simply the collective *name* of all the cracks and shakings and disturbances that happen. They *are* the earthquake. But for me the earthquake was the *cause* of the disturbances, and the perception of it as a living agent was irresistible. It had an overpowering dramatic convincingness. I realize now better than ever how inevitable were men's earlier mythologic versions of such catastrophes, and how artificial and against the grain of our spontaneous perceiving are the later habits into which science educates us.
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> JAMES 1983: 332–333

For James, the impulse to perceive agency in nature is an instinctive human reaction. The scientific mindset of seeing events like earthquakes as

random, undirected, and goalless is unnatural and unintuitive. The tendency to perceive humanlike, goal-directed agency where none exists is known as *agenticity*, and it is an extension of a larger phenomenon known as *patternicity* (Shermer 2009), the detection of patterns in noise. Obvious examples of patternicity include seeing faces in the Martian landscape or grilled cheese sandwiches; although people might know on an intellectual level that mountains and burn marks form according to deterministic physical processes and these images are illusory, they nevertheless recognise patterns and form judgments based on them. Psychologists have long speculated about why agenticity and patternicity are such a common element of the human experience (Atran and Norenzayan 2004). Some (for instance, Shermer 2009) suggest that it is an evolutionary adaptation; that people are better off making Type I errors (false positives) than Type II errors (false negatives). The cost of a false positive might be quite small (for instance, being startled by an oddly-shaped bush that looks like a predator) while the cost of a false negative might be quite high (for instance, dismissing a predator as simply an oddly-shaped bush and being caught off-guard by it). Patternicity, the reasoning goes, is therefore adaptive. The same logic can be invoked to explain our tendency toward agenticity. As Popper (1946) acknowledged, conspiracies happen very frequently on an interpersonal scale: it is not controversial to say that two or more people might conspire to bully or harass someone, or to gain an unfair advantage over others. As social animals, it pays for humans to be vigilant against conspiracies and to look out for instances of others cheating the system, colluding to gain an advantage, or otherwise violating social norms of fair play. Suspicion can be useful and rational, and the ability to perceive the same agency behind seemingly unconnected events can pay major dividends. In general, under this account, it is better to see patterns in noise than to miss real patterns. Patternicity and agenticity therefore both result from a signal-detection bias with a long evolutionary history.

3 Compensatory Control

Whatever people's innate bias toward detecting patterns and agency might be, recent work has shown that it can be manipulated in the laboratory. In an influential series of experiments, Whitson and Galinsky (2008) demonstrated that the tendency toward patternicity can be raised or lowered by inducing a feeling of having or lacking control. People who are made to feel a lack of control over their lives are more likely to see illusory images in collections of random dots, to come up with superstitious explanations for events, and to

explain ambiguous social situations by speculating about hidden conspiracies. The authors argued that this induced increase in patternicity is a form of *compensatory control* (Kay *et al.* 2009): when someone's sense of control over their life is threatened, they try to compensate for it by affirming a sense of order elsewhere. Turning to an omnipresent God, reaffirming one's belief in public institutions, affirming deeply held values, and spotting conspiracies, patterns, and superstitions all help to restore a lost sense of control by making the world seem orderly and knowable. If an earthquake is the result of tectonic plates shifting along inscrutably, there is not much that can be done about it. If instead the earthquake was caused by human agents, however powerful, perhaps they can be stopped somehow. In agreement with the compensatory control account of conspiracy theory belief, research shows that people with an external locus of control—that is, a general sense of lacking control over their own lives—are more likely than others to believe in conspiracy theories (Abalakina-Paap *et al.* 1999; Hamsher *et al.* 1968). However, as with much research on individual differences in conspiracy theory belief, the causal direction is not clear; it is possible that people might shift from a relatively internal locus of control to a relatively external one as a result of coming to believe that the world is ruled by nefarious conspiracies.

Religion also serves a compensatory control function; recent work has shown that religious conviction is boosted by events that threaten a sense of personal control (Kay *et al.* 2010). To continue the earthquake example, if an earthquake is the result of God's wrath, then perhaps God can be propitiated, or at least his wrath can be predicted. This would increase feelings of control and provide a palliative for a sense of external control or helplessness. Though religious belief is clearly relevant for feelings of control, the relationship is not straightforward, and seems to be moderated by a number of interacting demographic variables, as well as the type of religion in question. The 'collaborative' approach to religious belief emphasises a mutual working relationship between the believer and God, while the 'deferring' approach involves the believer relinquishing feelings of personal responsibility to God entirely (Pargament *et al.* 1988). Finally, the 'spiritual surrender' approach involves selectively surrendering control over seemingly uncontrollable situations to God, while maintaining personal responsibility most of the time. This third approach is positively associated with feelings of control (Cole and Pargament 1999; Fiori *et al.* 2006), and internal control is particularly associated with religious belief among older adults (Fiori *et al.* 2006).

In general, then, compensatory control processes provide a palliative function for a feeling of lacking control by affirming the existence of powerful external forces that transcend the self. We have seen that these external forces can

include both conspiracies and supernatural beings. However, one particularly well-studied form of compensatory control involves an external force that is less nebulous, mysterious, or mystical than those reviewed above. *System justification* describes the tendency to affirm the values of the social system one is a part of, be it religious, economic, or political. System justification is a general psychological tendency, but paradoxically, it is particularly pronounced among people who belong to disadvantaged groups. Women, the poor, and ethnic minorities tend to display stronger system justification motives than men, the rich or the middle class, and ethnic majorities (for a review, see Jost *et al.* 2004). In this way, the system justification motive acts as a counterweight to the motive to improve one's own lot in life, or to advocate for the advancement of one's own social group.

Research into the cognitive correlates of system justification (Jost *et al.* 2014) indicates that it shares many of its social-psychological motives with religiosity. Both religion and system justification make people happier with social conditions that are largely out of their control, and more religious people tend to be more conservative and authoritarian (Leak and Randall 1995), and to believe more strongly in a just world (Rubin and Peplau 1975). Some systems of religious belief and some conspiracy theories can be seen as methods of system justification, as part of a larger drive toward compensatory control. Conspiracy theories about global warming are a prime example of this: the system justification motive increases resistance to the scientific consensus on climate change (Douglas and Sutton 2015; Feygina *et al.* 2010). That is not the whole story of conspiracy theories, of course, nor is religion simply a way of justifying the systems around us. That much is abundantly clear, both from the conspiracy theories that provide a counter-narrative to larger social systems that are seen as rotten, unfair, and morally bankrupt (Sapountzis and Condor 2013), and from systems of religious practice such as liberation theology.

The above explanations make some degree of intuitive sense, but some caution is warranted. While the moderating role of compensatory control in pattern recognition has been confirmed by a recent meta-analysis (Landau *et al.* 2015), it is not unequivocally clear that beliefs in conspiracy theories are best understood as an expression of patternicity. Recent research has shown no evidence of a correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and the tendency to perceive intentional patterns in sequences of coin flips (Dieguez *et al.* 2015).

4 Reasoning Ability and Cognitive Style

An important individual difference variable linked to patternicity and agenticity is the ability to engage in probabilistic reasoning. When presented with a

set of events, someone might see their conjunction as a coincidence, or they might interpret it as evidence of a causal connection. Just as compensatory control changes how people distinguish order from randomness, their capacity for probabilistic reasoning influences how they judge whether something is coincidental. A classic example of this is thinking about someone and then immediately receiving a telephone call from them. This is a very common experience, and is often ascribed to paranormal causes (Schmidt *et al.* 2009). Likewise, a particular pattern of stock trading before a terrorist attack might be seen as either business as usual or as evidence of stock market manipulation based on foreknowledge of the attack. Evidence from psychological studies suggests that performance on probabilistic reasoning tasks is negatively correlated with beliefs in conspiracy theories (Brotherton and French 2014), and that general reasoning ability is negatively correlated with religiosity (Hergovich and Arendasy 2005). Under this explanation, then, some people tend to systematically underestimate the chance of random events occurring in conjunction with one another; for instance, they find it extremely unlikely that they would happen to receive a phone call from someone just after thinking about them, when it might in fact be moderately likely. These people then attribute those coincidental events to a common cause, which is often supernatural or conspiratorial in nature, leading to increased paranormal, superstitious, or conspiracy beliefs.

If this is so, it would match a great deal of primary sources on the process by which producers of conspiracy theories come up with new explanations for events. Conspiracist luminaries such as Alex Jones, Jim Marrs, David Icke, and any number of YouTube superstars speak of connecting the dots, and of seeing the links between supposedly separate pieces of information that bring them all together into a cohesive whole (Brotherton 2015). Psychologists refer to this big-picture style of thinking as *holistic*. Holistic thinking is concerned with the interrelationships between the various elements of something, seeing the bigger picture rather than the individual components of it. The complement of holistic thinking is *analytic* thinking, which is concerned with careful examination and consideration of the individual parts of a larger whole. While everyone engages in both holistic and analytic thinking, people tend to favour one or the other to varying extents, and this can have profound effects on the ways in which people think about the world. People who think more analytically in general tend to be more sceptical of conspiracy theories, and inducing analytic thinking in a laboratory setting can reduce belief in conspiracy theories as well (Swami *et al.* 2014). Similarly, many investigations have linked holistic thinking with religious belief (Pennycook *et al.* 2012): just as conspiracy thinking can be attenuated by analytic thinking, so too can religious belief (Gervais and Norenzayan 2012). With its sensitivity to context, tendency to take a broad

view of matters, and sometimes disregard contradictory details (also viewable in belief in conspiracy theories; Wood *et al.* 2012; Irwin *et al.* 2015), it makes sense that holistic cognition would be associated with abnormal, transcendent, or paranormal beliefs.

In line with this general characterisation, holistic thinkers tend to be higher in trait schizotypy (Wolfradt *et al.* 1999). Schizotypy is a continuum of everyday psychological experience that ranges from normality to psychosis, and everyone is located somewhere along it. While people lower in schizotypy are likely to be relatively conventional, people on the higher range of the schizotypal spectrum are more likely to have anomalous (paranormal or religious) experiences and to believe unusual things, such as conspiracy theories or unconventional spiritualities (Barron *et al.* 2014; Bruder *et al.* 2013; Dagnall *et al.* 2015; Darwin *et al.* 2011). In general, then, there is abundant evidence that both conspiracy theory belief and religious belief are fostered by a particular set of cognitive and perceptual characteristics.

5 Belief in a Just World

Conspiracy theory belief may also be fostered by people's perceptions of the justness of the world around them. According to the *Just World Hypothesis* in psychology (Lerner 1980; Lerner and Lerner 1981) people have a strong motivation to view the world as just, orderly, safe, and predictable. People are uncomfortable believing that the world is random and that bad things happen for no reason at all. In a just world, people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. According to Lerner, there are important reasons why people hold this belief. To make plans and achieve their goals, people need to feel that their actions will have predictable outcomes. They also need to believe that the actions of others will lead to similarly predictable outcomes. Therefore, if someone suffers in a just world, it is quite likely that they deserved it. By convincing themselves that the world is just, people will therefore derogate victims of rape, murder, and other injustices because in a just world, these things would not happen unless the victims were responsible in some way (Callan *et al.* 2006; Dalbert 2009; Sutton *et al.* 2008; Testé and Perrin 2013). Just-world beliefs feature prominently in morality tales that people have grown up with, where good is rewarded and evildoers get their just deserts. The belief in a just world is therefore constantly reinforced.

This belief is a common feature of many religious doctrines. For example, in Buddhism and Hinduism, the concept of 'karma' holds that the actions of an individual influence the future of that individual. So, if people do good deeds they will be rewarded in life, but their bad actions may return to haunt them.

Indeed, in Hinduism, a person's status (caste) in life is assumed to be the result of their virtues or sins from a previous existence. In Christianity, people are judged for their deeds on earth once they have died and come to face their god. Further, the belief that an all-powerful god orders the world both encourages and supports just-world beliefs. It is easier to explain that something bad happened to a person because they were a 'sinner' than to try to explain it in other ways. In empirical support of the link between belief in a just world and religious belief, Rubin and Peplau (1975) found that people who have a tendency to believe in a just world also tend to be more religious.

The belief in a just world would, however, appear to be at odds with belief in conspiracy theories. In a just world, why would secret powers be able to get away with their misdeeds when they ought to be punished? On the contrary, recent research suggests that conspiracy beliefs may actually serve to justify the status quo (Jolley *et al.* 2017). By attributing negative actions to a small group of malevolent individuals, the perception that society, as a whole, is fair (operationalised in this research by the related concept of system justification [Jost and Banaji 1994]), can be upheld. Research is needed to establish the precise role of just-world belief in this process, but it is likely that the fundamental need to see the world as just would be associated with conspiracy beliefs that depict negative events in society as the responsibility of malicious and unjust groups rather than the justness of the world itself.

Just-world beliefs may also influence what people do as a result of exposure to conspiracy theories. For example, Jolley and Douglas (2014a; 2014b) have shown that conspiracy theories lead people to be more apathetic in several domains. Specifically, exposure to conspiracy theories leads to lower intentions to vote, vaccinate, and take action to reduce one's carbon footprint. Rubin and Peplau (1975) showed that believers in a just world, like believers in conspiracy theories, tend to feel less of a need to engage in activities to change society or alleviate the plight of social victims. It may therefore be the case that conspiracy belief and just-world belief are closely tied together and determine what people care to do about societal problems. It is also possible to link these ideas to religious belief. That is, if people believe that a god will fix the ills of society, then they do not have to do anything themselves and can remain indifferent to attempts to establish justice. Ironically, therefore, both belief in a just world and conspiracy belief may take the place of commitment to justice and may even impede justice.

6 Thematic Parallels and Concordant Worldviews

The parallels between religion and conspiracy theories go beyond the psychological explanations that have been deployed to account for them. Conspiracy

theories sometimes have a strong religious component, and some religious beliefs are explicitly conspiracist in nature. Thematic parallels are unsurprising, but psychologically important. Like any idea, a conspiracy theory is more likely to be accepted when it fits into an established worldview, or when it otherwise agrees with what we already believe. Devout Christians are likely to reject *Da Vinci Code*-type conspiracy theories about the early Catholic church tampering with the Biblical canon, while people who are less traditionally religious and more aligned with New Age spirituality find these theories considerably more plausible (Newheiser *et al.* 2011). Given that religious beliefs lend themselves well to the development of broad worldviews, it is unsurprising that many successful conspiracy theories build upon a foundation of religious belief, or draw upon religious symbolism in more subtle ways.

For instance, in the United States, evangelical Christian beliefs about the End Times frequently incorporate a global government as a vehicle for the rise of the Antichrist (Barkun 2013; Patterson 1988). Evangelical concern about a Satanic global government usurping the powers of individual nation-states was historically associated with anti-communist activism, as global communism was thought to be the ultimate instrument of the Antichrist's plan for world domination. Since the end of the Cold War, evangelical concern about global government has shifted from an explicitly anti-Soviet mentality to more general fears about the so-called 'New World Order', and has given rise to organised political opposition to barcodes, RFID chips, and national identification numbers as potential "Marks of the Beast" (Sullivan 2012). The spread of evangelical New World Order theories has been aided by popular Christian films and TV series that incorporate conspiratorial themes and imagery in their portrayal of the apocalypse. An instructive example is the book and film series *Left Behind* (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995), which merges John Birch-style anti-Soviet paranoia with post-Cold War worries about a leftist New World Order. For LaHaye and Jenkins, the Satanic global government will be a politically correct New Age empire known as the 'Global Community'. Echoing the debt owed by mid-century American eschatological thought to the writings of the John Birch Society (and rather anachronistically, for a series set at the turn of the millennium), it will be brought about by a financial conspiracy masterminded by an analogue of John D. Rockefeller. Tellingly, the series retains the Cold War-era evangelical orthodoxy that the End Times will start with a failed Russian attempt at invading Israel.

Many conspiracy theories that do not incorporate overt religious content nevertheless show their intellectual debt to particular religious or mythological ideas. 'Superconspiracies'—conspiracy worldviews that incorporate many individual theories into a larger plot (Barkun 2013)—are often tinged

with a sense of urgency, under the reasoning that the conspirators' plan is finally coming to fruition and that they will soon unleash their ultimate plan for world domination. Conspiracy media figures such as Alex Jones constantly warn of the impending victory of the conspirators (Jones 2015), and explicitly apocalyptic theories like those about the Nibiru cataclysm (Reyes and Smith 2014) are entirely concerned with the idea of an oncoming apocalypse. While David Icke is widely known for his thesis that the world is run by shape-shifting reptilian beings from another dimension, less well known is his interpretation of the Abrahamic creation myth, in which humanity and Earth existed in a state of balance and harmony before the interference of evil reptiles caused a catastrophic fall from grace (Icke 2012). For Icke, rather than a garden, paradise was an implausible celestial configuration in which Earth orbited Saturn, which was a second sun at the time. Rather than humanity being exiled from Eden for its sins, the interference of the reptilians (who arrived in the solar system in their spacecraft, the hollow Moon) resulted in Earth being thrown about in a game of celestial billiards (compare Sagan 1979) until it came to rest in its current orbit. Now, the adversary waits in the shadows, but very soon it will unmask itself and seize power using a genocidal, communistic world government.

Putting aside the considerable influences from other sources (both the esoteric, like Immanuel Velikovsky's ideas of planetary-scale catastrophism and Erich von Daniken's ancient astronaut theories, and the popular, like Icke's ongoing references to the *Matrix* trilogy and the influence of *Star Wars* in his assertion that the Moon is actually an evil space station [Icke 2013: 149, 173]), Icke's mythos is immediately understandable as a new twist on a very old story. It diverges considerably from Christian orthodoxy, but there are clear parallels: an Edenic existence was destroyed by the influence of a reptilian outsider who then lurks in the shadows, biding its time and causing chaos. Icke's eschatology also borrows heavily from the more conventional New World Order theories espoused by American evangelical Christians (compare Robertson 2013). For those with a background rooted in western Christian culture, the material is familiar, yet different enough to stand out as memorable.

7 Minimal Counterintuitiveness

An important concept in the cognitive science of religion is that of minimal counterintuitiveness, or MCI (Boyer 1994). If something is MCI, it is easier to remember than something that is entirely intuitive or maximally counterintuitive (for a critical review, see Purzycki and Willard 2016). Something is

classified as MCI if it violates one or two deep ontological intuitions about the fundamental properties of the basic category of objects it belongs to, such as ANIMAL, TOOL, PLANT, or PERSON (Barrett 2008). For instance, a very basic intuition about plants—one thought to be more or less innate—is that they do not possess the capacity for speech. As such, a singing tree would be MCI because it violates the 'no speech' property of the PLANT category. Further violations of deep intuitions may render the object maximally counterintuitive: for instance, if the tree not only sings, but also does calculus, eats hamburgers, and can turn invisible, its counterintuitiveness is no longer minimal. A related concept, and one that is easy to conflate with MCI, is counter-schematicity. Something can be classified as counter-schematic if it does not violate deep ontological intuitions about a basic object category, but instead violates relatively shallow cultural or learned expectations about the category it belongs to. A dog with scales would be counter-schematic because we know that dogs are furry rather than scaly, but it would not be MCI because it does not violate our most basic intuitions about the ANIMAL category (that animals move around on their own, cannot pass through solid objects, etc.).

Minimal counterintuitiveness and counter-schematicity are important concepts here because of their relevance to the memorability and spread of religious narratives and other cultural artefacts. A number of researchers (for example Atran and Norenzayan 2004) have argued that many figures in religious narratives, such as gods, spirits, and saints, are MCI. A ghost, for instance, can be thought of as an MCI variation on the PERSON category (as it breaches the assumption of corporeality). Much work in the cognitive science of religion concerns the finding that MCI concepts are easier to remember than fully intuitive, maximally counterintuitive, or simply counter-schematic ones; this has been proposed as a possible reason for the spread and persistence of many religious beliefs (Boyer 1994; Sperber 1996). This memory effect has also been deployed to account for the popularity of conspiracy theories. In particular, Franks *et al.* (2013) proposed that all conspiracy theories are at least minimally counterintuitive. Specifically, the suspected conspirators are seen as unusually, perhaps supernaturally, competent within a certain domain. For Franks *et al.*, the success of a conspiracy theory is a function of its minimal counterintuitiveness. However, it is unclear whether conspiracy theories are generally MCI in the sense that they violate basic ontological assumptions about fundamental categories of objects in the world (like a tree that can sing), or are simply counter-schematic, in the sense that they violate our expectations but do not run counter to very deep assumptions about the nature of basic object categories (like a scaly dog, or, indeed, a scaly human).

Ultimately, the difference between an MCI concept and a counter-schematic concept may be one of degree (Purzycki and Willard 2016). While there seems

to be a memory advantage for MCI over counter-schematic concepts (Johnson *et al.* 2010), Purzycki (2010, 2011) demonstrated that concepts that are at once MCI and counter-schematic are more memorable than concepts that are only one or neither, and that counter-schematic concepts tend to be perceived as funnier than MCI ones. In the current Western context, conspiracy theories are almost invariably counter-schematic; they generally present themselves in opposition to a dominant system of belief that is actually a pawn of the conspirators, and lend themselves to a provocatively different worldview from what is in the mainstream (Wood *et al.* 2012; Wood and Douglas 2013). While a conspiracy theory garners the most agreement when it is generally in line with someone's broader belief systems (Newheiser *et al.* 2011), a divergence from mainstream worldviews generally adds something counter-schematic. For instance, the existence of a world-controlling conspiracy is not far removed from the already largely invisible deliberations of elected governments and diplomats. Likewise, many conspiracy theories posit secretive, advanced technologies that are many decades ahead of current public understanding; weather control and other science-fiction weaponry are certainly counter-schematic when applied to real life.

There is much work still to be done in this area. Even in the context of religion, where the MCI concept originates, it is not clear to what extent the increased memorability of MCI concepts translates into increased transmission or spread (Purzycki and Willard, 2016). More specifically, it is not clear to what degree conspiracy theories tend to be intuitive, maximally counterintuitive, MCI, counter-schematic, or some combination. While Franks *et al.* (2013) are certainly correct that conspiring agents are sometimes ascribed supernatural or near-supernatural powers, it is not clear that this is always or even usually the case, or that when it does happen that it constitutes an MCI property rather than a simply counter-schematic one. Moreover, Franks *et al.* (2013) gave the example of David Icke's shape-shifting reptilian aliens as a *maximally* counterintuitive concept, but they may be one of the few examples of genuinely *minimally* counterintuitive conspirators, as they are essentially humans with one or two major breaches of the PERSON category (noncorporeality or the ability to take on different physical forms, depending on which revision of Icke's lizard thesis is at issue) and several counter-schematic properties (extreme malevolence, extraterrestrial origin, technological advancement, and scaliness).

8 The Social Dimension of Belief

Finally, we turn from the content of beliefs to the functions they serve. In an incisive exploration of the parallels between conspiracy theories and religious beliefs, Franks *et al.* (2013) highlighted one aspect in which the two diverge

considerably: the role of social interaction and community. While both conspiracy theories and religious beliefs have a clear social dimension, the communitarian aspects of religion are much more salient. Religious practices, particularly attendance, are associated with greater social connectedness and better health outcomes (George *et al.* 2002). Conspiracy theories might mobilise a group or motivate them to collective action over some perceived injustice, but they do not, in general, provide a clear social structure around which communities are built. There is no research as yet on the relationship between conspiracy belief and social connectedness, but very few conspiracy theories have a codified system of ritual or practice that would necessitate community participation and foster social connectedness in the same way that systems of religious belief and practice do. Moreover, while religiosity is generally positively associated with civic participation and prosocial behaviour (Smidt 1999; though see Schwadel 2005), belief in (or at least exposure to) conspiracy theories seems to show the opposite effect (Jolley and Douglas 2014a; 2014b).

9 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed several lines of evidence that indicate an isomorphism between conspiracy theories and religious beliefs. Their psychological antecedents are similar: they can both help to restore a lost sense of control in various ways, and are both associated with holistic thinking and schizotypy rather than analytic thinking and probabilistic reasoning. Both conspiracy theories and religious beliefs can serve to impose order upon the world in broad strokes, providing a context that resolves troubling ambiguity and gives meaning to things that might otherwise seem disconnected and meaningless in isolation. On the cultural side, the conspiracist and religious worldviews draw upon one another, with conspiracy theories informing emerging religious doctrines and religious mythology providing a source of raw material for conspiracist speculation. Yet, conspiracy theories and religious beliefs tend to diverge on key points: they may appear to have opposite relationships with regard to the idea that the world is just, and have a very different social dimension—while social cohesion and shared ritual are a primary feature of religious belief systems, the same cannot be said of most conspiracy theories. In general, from a psychological perspective, similar motivations underlie both conspiracy belief and religious belief, and there are overlaps in the content and style of both belief systems, but they are different enough not to be psychologically interchangeable.

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CHAPTER 5

A Web of Conspiracy? Internet and Conspiracy Theory

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1 Introduction

The Internet has been blamed for every bogeyman ailing our society. From crime, to adultery, to promiscuity, to political polarisation, to extremism, and even to violence—the list goes on. Perhaps one of the charges most frequently levied at the Internet is that it causes people to believe in conspiracy theories. Hardly a discussion of conspiracy theories takes place in the media without an obligatory mention of the role the Internet plays in both fostering and spreading conspiratorial beliefs.

For journalists on a deadline, it is very easy to conclude that the Internet causes people to believe strange and dubious claims, including conspiracy theories. After all, the Internet is full of websites featuring obscure and fringe topics. A Google search for the term 'conspiracy theory' garners 16.5 million results; '9/11 conspiracy' garners 23.4 million, and 'Reptilian Elites' provides 230,000.

A quick search of YouTube.com yields videos such as "Globalist Conspiracy Plans for the New World Order Exposed," "The JFK Assassination: Conspiracy, Photos, Facts, Autopsy, Documentary Evidence," "Hollow Earth, The Biggest Cover Up," and "Kanye West Sacrifices his Mom to Illuminati for Fame and $$$ Conspiracy Theory EXPOSED!!!"

Furthermore, conspiracy theories do not merely lurk around on obscure websites or in user-generated clearing houses like YouTube. Even if a person were not browsing the dark corners of the Web in search of schemes and skulduggery, they are likely to unintentionally stumble into a conspiracy-laden yarn among the general reporting from the traditional news outlets. A search for the term 'conspiracy theory' on the websites of high-profile news outlets *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Atlantic* yields 1,134, 1,546, and 349 articles respectively.

Given their ubiquity, it is little wonder that journalists have recently claimed that "when you start looking for conspiracy theories online, they seem to be everywhere," and that perhaps because of this, the US has become

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a "Conspiratocracy" (LaFrance 2015; Jacobsen 2011). Scholars exploring conspiracy theorising have also claimed that the Internet is directly responsible for recent conspiracy mongering (for instance Stempel *et al.* 2007; Smith and Novella 2007). In fact, any casual observer of the Internet could reasonably conclude that the Internet is stocked full with conspiracy theories, and that the world has descended into a conspiracy-fuelled delirium because of it.

The problem with many of these observations is that the Internet can give a much-distorted impression of how prevalent conspiracy theories are in relation to other online content, and what their effect is on people's beliefs. The USA has always had conspiracy theories. Indeed, conspiracy theories featured more prominently in American politics during earlier eras (Uscinski and Parent 2014), and around the world, conspiracy theories feature more prominently in societies less rather than more connected to the Internet (see, for instance, Briggs 2004). So what is special about conspiracy theorising now that has lead people to suggest that the Internet has changed things? The evidence needed to answer this question is not always clear. Does the Internet deserve its reputation as the prime driver of modern conspiracy theorising?

In this chapter, we will argue that as in conspiracy theories, the truth may lie beneath the surface. The good news is that in this case, the shadowy obscured truth has little to do with string-pullers or plots.

We contend that the Internet has not done as much for conspiracy theorising as many otherwise assume. Does the Internet drive conspiracy theorising and what evidence is there? No doubt the Internet provides the ability to make ideas widely available, but how large are the audiences that actually access those ideas? Given that conspiracy theories are prominently featured in traditional news sites, one might assume that even Internet users not inclined towards seeking them out cannot escape them. But how are conspiracy theories discussed in the news environment? Are conspiracy theories treated as possibly true explanations of events (see, for instance, Kata 2010), or are they widely mocked and derided (Husting and Orr 2007)? The Internet provides the opportunity for users to transmit ideas to worldwide audiences, but are those ideas traversing the Internet in cascades convincing everyone in their path (much like a disease), or is the Internet only reaching and convincing those who already agree with those ideas?

We proceed as follows: we begin by asking what would we observe if the Internet drove conspiratorial beliefs? What propositions would be true? We weigh the available evidence drawing on extant findings from the public opinion and media effects literatures. Finally, we examine the claim that the Internet can spread conspiracy theories farther and faster than ever before. In considering this claim, we investigate the life cycle of attention to conspiracy

theories on the Internet. While we conclude that many of the broad claims about the Internet's influence over conspiracy theorising are overblown, there are some effects of Internet use that despite being limited and conditional, may be particularly insidious.

2 Underlying Assumptions about the Relationship between the Internet and Conspiracy Theories

It's tough to imagine a time before the Internet, but it is just one of many communication technologies to come along in the last century. Before mass use of the Internet in the late 1990s, satellite television entered homes in the mid 1990s, cable television in the late 1970s, broadcast television in the 1950s and radio in the 1920s. With each development, critics believed that the steady availability of information and entertainment would spell the end of society. Fortunately, the critics in each instance were wrong.

Even before most people were aware of the Internet's potential, some predicted that it would raise "troubling possibilities" (Markoff 1990). While no technology comes without its negative externalities, it is uncontroversial to suggest that the Internet has been one of the greatest inventions of mankind and that the world is much better for it. Concerns that predicted the worst have been overdrawn.

Notwithstanding its positive benefits, the Internet continues to be blamed for many of the world's problems. The Internet certainly imposes some social costs in addition to its benefits, but critics typically fail to put those costs into perspective and unfairly blame the Internet for social ills and human frailties that run much deeper than communication technology. Some critics can't help but view the pre-Internet age with rosy hindsight and transfer blame from people to technologies. For example, many claimed that the net would provide paedophiles with easy access to potential victims, enabling a new age of child victimisation. No doubt people with evil intentions have used (and continue to use) the Internet to commit evil acts, but tellingly, perhaps the biggest uncovering of such abuse during the Internet age involved abuses that took place long before the Internet. Technologies, including the Internet, act only as a mechanism to help people do things that they would likely otherwise attempt to do anyway.

Many believed at the Internet's onset (and still to this day) that the unlimited access to information that online computing provides would drive people into a conspiracy-induced mass-hysteria. Even those realising that human nature

is more prone to continuity than change believed that the Internet would give conspiratorial ideas a platform from which they could have a much greater impact. In 1995, the *New York Times* wrote:

> Students of American history say that paranoiacs with weapons have always been with us, from the Whiskey Rebellion of 200 years ago to the present day. But today, people who have long been dismissed as crackpots and wackos use new technology to spread the kind of conspiracy theories that used to go no further than the next bar stool.
>
> EGAN 1995

While such appraisals no doubt catch the eye, there are many built-in assumptions about people, the Internet, and the behaviour of people on the Internet that usually go unnoticed or ignored when evaluating such claims.

If we are to accept the notion that conspiracy theories are more now dangerous, more easily spread, or more widely believed than before the Internet, then the following must be, or would likely be true. Beginning with assumptions about people: the first is that in the past, ideas—such as conspiracy theories—did not travel far or fast, but because of the Internet such ideas can be adopted by many more people today. People should therefore be more conspiratorially minded than they were prior to the Internet. The second assumption is that people's views are easily pliable, and can be altered by nothing more than reading a webpage or receiving a communication on social media. The third is that people actively access conspiratorial information on the Web.

In addition to these assumptions about people, we would likely have to make the following assumption about the Internet: that its content depicts conspiracy theories positively enough to convince people of their veracity. Finally, we would have to make an assumption about how information traverses social media: that information spreads indiscriminately from user to user, in herd behaviour. Let's now examine the evidence that might support or undermine these assumptions.

2.1 *Assumptions about People*

2.1.1 Faster and Farther

It is often assumed that because of the Internet, ideas can travel farther and faster than before, and because of this, conspiracy theories have a much greater reach now than prior. But is this true? Obviously, it would be tough to argue that the Internet does not spread information faster than before. One can have their emails, tweets, and posts read on the other side of the world in less than

a second; previously this would have been impossible. But, just because communications were slower before the Internet age, does not mean that they did not travel as far or as widely, as The *New York Times* suggests above.

There is a rich literature on rumour transmission documenting how conspiracy theories—which are one form of rumour—spread through interpersonal contact (Allport and Postman 1947; Anthony 1973; DiFonzo and Bordia 2007; Firth 1956; Jung 1959; Rosnow 1980; Rosnow *et al.* 1988; Rosnow *et al.* 1986). The findings of this research—most of which took place before the Internet age—indicate that conspiracy theories can spread rather quickly through word of mouth and are sometimes difficult to stop once started. With this said, the research also shows that not all people buy into conspiracy theories and that there are certain conditions that can promote or inhibit the ability of a conspiracy theory to influence people. For example, conditions of uncertainty and tragedy have been shown to positively affect the likelihood of conspiracy theories spreading (Prasad 1935; Anthony 1973; DiFonzo and Bordia 2007; DiFonzo *et al.* 1994). But most importantly, the findings show that many people discount conspiracy theories often because those theories do not comport with their predispositions. This mechanism alone keeps the vast majority of conspiracy theories from attracting followers or spreading (we will return to this idea later).

Despite the speed in which information can now travel, the Internet may actually make it more difficult for conspiracy theories to spread. Relative to the pre-Internet world, the Internet may facilitate more correction and moderation than existed in the past: source authority is more likely to matter in the Internet age and rebuttals travel as fast (and sometimes faster) than conspiracy theories.

Whereas folk wisdom may have been more compelling in the past, information consumers today can seek medical information from medical experts, foreign policy insights from foreign policy experts, and news analysis from journalists and policy-makers. It is, of course, an open question as to who one considers an expert, but such immediate access was not available in the pre-Internet age. This gives Internet users the near-unlimited opportunity to interact with people who have correct (or the best available) knowledge. This in itself should lead to a better information environment and less unsubstantiated folk wisdom. For example, the largest trafficked sites in the USA are mainstream sites rather than sites dedicated to conspiracy theories or other types of unsubstantiated information (we will discuss this more later).

Moreover, when a conspiratorial idea starts to sprout, it is much easier to respond with contradictory evidence and points of view in a society connected by the Internet (Clarke 2007). The mainstream media—which maintains the most prominent presence on the Web—is very quick to report on conspiracy theories, but not to suggest that they might be true. Rather, much of the information environment—as we will discuss later—treats conspiracy theories as suspect. The Internet does not just refute and castigate conspiracy theories, but

it often does so before the conspiracy theories have time to become popular or well-developed (Clarke 2007). It may be the case in many instances that wide audiences will hear a refutation of a conspiracy theory from mainstream media outlets and other authoritative sources, rather than a propagation of those theories. To name one example, conspiracy theories about the 2015 terror attack in San Bernardino immediately began to swirl around on social media sites such as Reddit and Twitter after the attack. But the majority of people were not made aware of these conspiracy theories until outlets like the *Washington Post* ran stories implying that those theories were not true (see, for instance, Chokshi 2015). For wide audiences, this may create an inoculation that will prevent them from adopting that conspiracy theory if and when they do come into contact with information propagating it (Banas and Miller 2013; McHoskey 1995).

With this said, there are reasons to suspect that the Internet's large reach has some impact. The net can make conspiracy theories easily available to large swaths of people. Even if most people do not access conspiracy theories or, even if they do, believe them, there is still a portion of the population that will both access and adopt them. To begin, those people predisposed towards conspiratorial thinking, or otherwise predisposed toward a particular set of conspiracy theories (such as Republicans being open to conspiracy theories that accuse Democrats of conspiring), will both receive and potentially believe in conspiracy theories delivered on the Internet. The effect of this is that receptive groups will essentially exist in an echo chamber of information, receiving with relative ease, information that coincides with their already conspiratorial (or other) beliefs (see, for instance, Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). The Internet in this case reinforces a conspiratorial view of the world for these people who are already prone. This may not be a widespread effect, but the polarisation it can create is rather insidious.

In addition to those people who seek out and are predisposed towards conspiratorial information, other people may be exposed to conspiracy theories on the Internet and accept those theories because they have not yet heard a competing authoritative story. In this case, the Internet may convince people of a conspiracy theory, and even after they receive authoritative information, that conspiracy theory may still colour their beliefs (Thorson 2015).

Nonetheless, the notion of widespread pandemic effects is overblown. Instead, the effects of the Internet are more insidious: people who are disposed towards conspiracy theories will receive and accept information that serves to bolster their already conspiratorial mentality, and the speed at which the Internet delivers information allows conspiracy theories to reach some people and sway their opinions before other more authoritative information is available.

Many arguments can be made in favour of conspiracy theories; for example, many scholars argue that conspiracy theories are sometimes correct and that they benefit democratic society (see, for instance, Coady 2006; Uscinski and

Parent 2014). But, being *sometimes* correct also means that they are *mostly* incorrect, and because of this, they can have detrimental effects. To name but one example, the Internet is often credited with convincing a small group of people to not vaccinate their children: proponents of this conspiracy theory suggest that the 'true' dangers of vaccinations are being hidden from them by pharmaceutical manufactures (Kata 2010; Briones *et al.* 2011; Chung 2009; Jolley and Douglas 2014). These beliefs have led to unnecessary illness and death (Plait 2013; Goertzel 2010).

The Internet can be dangerous when it convinces people of false information, but people can be convinced of ideas without the help of the Internet. For example, conspiracy theories about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy became popular thirty years before the Internet came into wide use. Belief in JFK assassination theories grew so strong that by the late 1970s, Congress had to open an investigation into the conspiracy theories, which it did. By the mid 1990s, only 10 per cent of Americans believed that the assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, acted alone (*CBS News* 1998; see also Krauss 1992). But, this trend reversed by 2015, so that 30 per cent believed that Oswald acted alone (Swift 2013). As Internet use increased, belief in JFK assassination conspiracy theories decreased.

A broader example comes from a well-known study of letters to the editor of *The New York Times* from 1890–2010 (Uscinski and Parent 2014), which shows that Americans tended to engage in conspiracy talk less after the arrival of the Internet than before, and with the exception of two large spikes in conspiracy theorising (the 1890s and 1950s), the public has engaged in less, rather than more conspiracy talk over time (for a detailed discussion of this data see Uscinski and Parent 2014: Chapter 3). If the Internet drove conspiracy theorising, then we would have expected to observe the opposite. A large spike in conspiracy theorising occurred in the early 1950s, focusing on communist plots during the well-documented Red Scare. Fifty-five years prior to that, fears of business monopolies and collusion proliferated (Uscinski and Parent 2014). But there is no systematic evidence showing that conspiracy theorising increased in the USA after the 1950s, regardless of what many journalists and cultural critics have argued:

> In 2013, *New York Times* Editor, Andrew Rosenthal saw a poll on US conspiratorial beliefs and summed it up in five words: "No Comment Necessary: Conspiracy Nation". Two years prior, the *New York Daily News* breathlessly declared: "It's official: America is becoming a conspiratocracy. The tendency for a small slice of the population to believe in devious plots has always been with us. But conspiracies have never spread this swiftly across the country. They have never lodged this deeply in the American psyche. And they have never found as receptive an audience."

> In 2010, *The Times* columnist David Aaronovitch was confident the West was "currently going through a period of fashionable conspiracism."
>
> USCINSKI and parent 2014: 105–106

In 2004, the *Boston Globe* suggested that we were then living in the "golden age of conspiracy theory" (McMahon 2004). A decade previous, the *Washington Post* claimed that Bill Clinton's first term "marked the dawn of a new age of conspiracy theory" (Thomas 1994) when only three years earlier the *Post* had posited that we then lived "in an age of conspiracy theories" (Krauthammer 1991). Back in 1977, the *Los Angeles Times* concluded the United States had set a world record: "we have become as conspiracy prone in our judgments as the Pan-Slav nationalists in the 1880s Balkans" (Geyer 1977). Rewinding to the fall of Camelot, the *New York Times* was sure 1964 was the age of conspiracy theories because they had "grown weedlike in this country and abroad" (*New York Times* 1964). Jonathan Kay, Managing Editor of the *National Post*, hedges and suggests twin peaks in the 1960s and 2000s (2011). Presumably we could multiply examples back to Salem in 1692, but you understand the point: conspiracy scares are ubiquitous.

Academics sing in similar cacophony. Film scholar Gordon Arnold (2008) and historian Robert Goldberg (2001) assert that conspiracy theorising in the United States rose markedly after World War II, while another historian, Daniel Pipes (1997), counters that conspiracy theories reached a crescendo at the outbreak of World War II, but declined steadily afterwards. Acclaimed historian David Brion Davis (2003) claimed that conspiracy theories were widespread in the nineteenth century, but are confined to "only a few crackpots and extremists" in modern times. Davis has since repented and concurred that "a world-weary pessimism and cynicism" has driven a new era of heightened belief in conspiracy theories. So who is right?[1]

It is easy when we hear about the latest shocking conspiracy theory to declare that a new apex of conspiracy theorising has been reached. But that can't be true all the time. And it is worth noting again that most conspiracy theories get minimal mention in any forum, and most attract few followers. It is only the more shocking and popular conspiracy theories that can be easily observed (Uscinski and Parent 2014). With this said, several prominent scholars of conspiracy theories (Knight 2002; Butter 2014) contend that cultural dynamics alter the way that conspiracy theories are communicated over time, with the end result being that levels of conspiratorial thinking are difficult to trace in systematic ways. This may or may not be true, but in either case, there is no systematic evidence showing that conspiratorial thinking has risen since the

1 Text adapted from Uscinski and Parent (2014).

arrival of the Internet, and scholars using qualitative, interpretive, or historical methods are divided on how levels of conspiratorial thought have fluctuated over time in the USA.

In short, conspiracy theories have existed throughout documented history. They have never needed the Internet to spread, and there is little evidence to suggest that the emergence of the Internet has brought about a new age of conspiracy theorising. Certainly the Internet has changed some aspects of conspiracy theorising, but there is no evidence that there has been a radical shift in conspiracy theorising coinciding with the emergence of the Internet. People engage in conspiracy theorising with whatever means are available at the time, and the Internet has not changed this.

2.1.2 Pliable?

Second, in order for the Internet to spread conspiracy theories, people's attitudes must be pliable enough to accept those theories and then pass them along to others. However, a long line of literature shows that people are fickle with their beliefs (Finkel 1993; Katz 1987; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944). It is true that media sources—whether on the Internet or not—provide information to people, thereby allowing them to learn much about the world they would not otherwise be able to observe directly. As Walter Lippman pointed out nearly a century ago:

> Each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth's surface, moves in a small circle, and of these acquaintances knows only a few intimately. Of any public event that has wide effects, we see at best only a phase and an aspect … Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and from what we can imagine.
>
> LIPPMAN 1922; cited in ZALLER 1992: 6

The Internet provides billions of people with news and information that they could not otherwise possibly get as quickly and efficiently, or at all. It has the ability to affect a user's knowledge about the world similar to the way that newspapers did in Lippman's time. There is a significant amount of information available about conspiracy theories on the Internet (Kata 2010), and several studies suggest that such information can drive people to adopt those conspiracy theories (Mulligan and Habel 2013; Hobson and Niemeyer 2012; Banas and Miller 2013; Einstein and Glick 2013, 2014). This goes to figure, if one were to access the outside world through the Internet and see nothing but lurking conspiracies, then this would certainly affect their view of the world. But

obviously, there is a lot more content on the Internet than just conspiracy theories. When scientists look more closely at who is most likely to be influenced by information suggesting a conspiracy on the Internet, they find that only certain people are susceptible to adopting those beliefs (Uscinski *et al.* 2016).

Catching glimpses of the outside world through the Internet is not the same as adopting or changing opinions about that world. Researchers have compiled a large body of studies showing that while messages through the media can affect some people, in some ways, some of the time, those effects are often smaller than is popularly assumed. Going back to the 1940s, studies documented that people's attitudes are largely stable in response to changing news environments (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944; Berelson *et al.* 1954). This led many scholars to adopt the 'minimal effects model' of media influence. In this model, media messages could reinforce (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Klapper 1960) or activate (Finkel 1993; Atkinson *et al.* 2014) existing dispositions, but not change them wholesale.

Political scientists in the 1960s found that the apparent stability of opinion was due to underlying worldviews such as partisanship, which are largely stable over the course of lifetimes (Campbell *et al.* 1960). Such worldviews are presumed to stem from childhood socialisation and solidify in early adulthood, although genetics and underlying psychology may also play a role. These worldviews—sometimes referred to as 'unmovable movers'—determine to a large degree which information people will accept or ignore, and how they will interpret that information (Zaller 1992).

These worldviews, sometimes referred to as predispositions, largely control which other opinions people will adopt through mass-elite linkages and heuristics. Elites are able to get their messages to the masses through media sources (this is part of what makes them 'elite'). People use heuristics to guide them in choosing which elites to pay attention to. For example, a Democrat will pay attention to Democratic Congresspeople speaking through the media because they know that a Congressperson with the label 'Democrat' is part of *their* group. This gives elites a great deal of power over those who are predisposed to listen (Hochschild 2013), but at the same time, little power over those who are not. Republicans don't regularly take cues from Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi or liberal news sources such as MSNBC; Democrats do not listen to Dick Cheney or Rush Limbaugh.

If we move past partisanship and look at the wide number of predispositions that people can hold, we find that opinions are largely fixed because people's underlying predispositions will act as barriers, controlling to a large degree what they access, receive, accept, and believe (Zaller 1992). For example, those who believe in *DaVinci Code* conspiracy theories tend to have pre-existing New Age and metaphysical belief systems (Newheiser *et al.* 2011).

Having these predispositions makes it easy to accept the idea that a secret bloodline of Christ's descendants continues to exist aided by the Priory of Sion. Conversely, being a devout Catholic makes it more difficult to accept theories about Jesus' progeny.

There is one predisposition that directly predicts the holding and adoption of conspiracy theories, and that is a predisposition towards conspiratorial thinking (Brotherton *et al.* 2013; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Bruder *et al.* 2013). This can be thought of as a bias towards seeing powerful actors and institutions as working in secret, against the common good, and for their own benefit (Uscinski and Parent 2014). This underlying predisposition drives people towards viewing events and circumstances as the product of conspiracy (Wood *et al.* 2012; Uscinski 2014; Uscinski *et al.* 2016). Much like a typical left-right ideological spectrum, people can be located along a spectrum from highly disposed towards thinking in conspiratorial terms (and seeing everything as the product of a conspiracy), to highly naïve (thinking nothing is the product of a conspiracy). The varying strengths of conspiratorial predispositions explain why some people resist conspiracy theories and believe in few, while other people accept conspiratorial logic and believe in many. All else being equal, the more predisposed a person is towards conspiratorial thinking, the more likely they will be to accept a specific conspiracy theory when given an informational cue that makes conspiratorial logic explicit.

This unique predisposition toward seeing conspiracies explains why many people believe in conspiracy theories that logically contradict each other: for example, believing both that Osama Bin Laden was dead before the Navy Seals killed him and that Osama Bin Laden is still alive (Wood *et al.* 2012). It also explains why authoritative evidence has a limited effect in reversing conspiratorial beliefs (Nyhan *et al.* 2013; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Since conspiratorial beliefs are often undergirded by strong conspiratorial predispositions, logic and evidence have little impact on them.

While there is great concern that heightened discussion of conspiracy theories in the media and on the Internet may drive the public to believe in conspiracy theories (see, for instance, Nyhan 2013), such information is likely to increase conspiratorial beliefs for people who are *both* predisposed to accept conspiratorial logic *and* whose other predispositions are in accord with the conspiracy theory being proffered. In short, a set of predispositions filters and interprets information, thereby limiting the possibility that people will view events and circumstances as the product of a specific conspiracy.

2.1.3 Do They Go?

Third, in order for people to believe in conspiracy theories because of the Internet, they would have to *go to* the Internet and *access* conspiracy theory-related

material first. Do they? Conspiracy theories certainly have their allure, and there is plenty of conspiracy-laden content out there. But in the USA, the websites with the most traffic are not devoted to conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory websites are not highly visited. For example, the main 9/11 Truther website, 911Truth.org, ranks as the 287,114th most trafficked site in the United States, and globally it ranks 489,799th. The Info Wars website, run by conspiracy theorist and radio host Alex Jones comes in at 1,053rd in terms of traffic in the USA, with about 390,142 unique visitors per day.[2]

In fact, none of the 100 most visited sites in the US are dedicated to conspiracy theories. People are on the Web looking for news, pornography, vacation destinations, and films far more often than they look for conspiracy theories. The people who traverse conspiracy theory websites are already disposed towards conspiratorial thinking (that's why they are seeking out such websites), and likely already believe that there is a conspiracy going on before they even get on the Web. For example, a study of Facebook users introduced a series of 'troll' posts (far-fetched conspiracy theories that the researchers invented, such as that 'chemtrails' contain Viagra). The researchers found that 80 per cent of users who regularly traverse conspiracy theory-related content believed and interacted with the troll posts, while only 20 per cent of users who traverse science-based sites interacted with the troll posts (Bessi *et al.* 2015). Those who believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories, even phony and contrived ones.

Most Internet use has nothing to do with conspiracy theories, and conspiracy theory websites are not highly trafficked. But, one doesn't necessarily have to look for conspiracy theories to find them: there is a great deal of conspiracy theory-related content on the Web, and mainstream news sites often discuss conspiracy theories. We return to this idea shortly.

2.2 *Assumptions about the Internet*

If the Internet were driving belief in conspiracy theories, we would assume that much of the conspiracy theory-related content portrayed conspiracy theories in a positive light. However, the best evidence suggests that the Web may not be as hospitable to conspiracy theories as some assume. No doubt there are many websites, videos, and posts alleging conspiracy theories, but unless one is already inclined to traverse these dark corners of the Web, they will likely never happen upon them. For those not so conspiratorially inclined, exposure to a conspiracy theory might only occur accidentally, perhaps while surfing

2 According to data obtained from Alexa.com on December 13, 2015.

through mainstream sites, reviewing readers' comments, or interacting with friends on social media.

This then begs the question, how does the mainstream information environment treat conspiracy theories? Uscinski and Parent (2014) examined the information environment on the Internet over the period of a year to see how it discussed conspiracy theories. They gathered and analysed about 3,000 stories from mainstream news and blogs pertaining to conspiracy theories. Sixty-three per cent of the stories discussed the conspiracy theory addressed negatively, perhaps with pejoratives such as 'fantasy', 'bizarre', or 'debunked'. Seventeen per cent were discussed neutrally, and 19 per cent were discussed positively. This indicates that if one were to simply come across news from the Internet, they would likely get a negative view of conspiracy theories.

Part of the reason for this is that elite rhetoric in the USA has an anti-conspiracy theory bias (Bratich 2004), and most Americans accept the government and economic systems as legitimate, rather than as corrupt or the product of a conspiracy. But perhaps more than this, the Internet seems to have a built-in reflex mechanism for dealing with ideas of uncertain validity.

When conspiracy theories emerge on the Internet to challenge authoritative accounts of events, the Internet acts to immediately call those conspiracy theories into question (Clarke 2007). To name but a few examples, after the tragic shootings in Newtown, CT, Roanoke, VA, and San Bernadino, CA, conspiracy theorists took to the Web to discuss false-flag theories. Many conspiracy theorists argued that the shootings were faked, perhaps with 'crisis actors', to hasten the passage of gun control laws (see, for instance, Fetzer and Palecek 2015). But as soon as these theories hit social media and conspiracy theory websites, the reaction took place. Mainstream news sources quickly attacked the conspiracy theorists and denounced their theories. For example, after the Newtown shooting, media elites such as Anderson Cooper focused on denouncing conspiracy theorists almost as much as they did the shooter (see, for instance, Feldman 2013). These reactions were not merely based on epistemic arguments, but on morality discourse, with those promoting the conspiracy theories presented as both immoral and crazy, and silent believers as stupid.

Just as conspiracy theorists post evidence supporting their theories, anti-conspiracy theorists are quick to post evidence refuting those theories (see, for example, Tracy 2013). This process may happen so quickly on the Internet that conspiracy theories now no longer have time to germinate and fully develop before they face refutation and moral judgment (Clarke 2007; Bode and Vraga 2015). This may happen in some instances before a person is ever exposed to arguments in favor of the conspiracy theory. When people are exposed to pro-conspiracy theory material, this may polarise initial belief patterns (Thorson

2015) and adversely affect other attitudes (Einstein and Glick 2014). So, the Internet may affect attitudes, but these effects pale in comparison to the "blanket" effects that commentators often attribute to the Internet.

3 Dynamics of How Information Traverses the Internet

How might conspiracy theories spread to and through societies on the Internet? There are two basic models of idea dissemination. The first is dissemination through hierarchical networks and the second is dissemination through horizontal (or flat) networks. Idea dissemination through hierarchical processes works through actors such as *The New York Times* and Fox News. In this dynamic, ideas gain attention when prominent elites engage in active discussion. Idea dissemination through horizontal networks depends on word of mouth and social networks. Ideas 'go viral' when they spread from person to person like a disease. The Internet makes this phenomenon much more possible and widespread.

Information flowing through horizontal networks can be high quality in the aggregate, reflecting the collective wisdom of crowds but it can also propagate seemingly irrational herd behaviour. When pundits speculate that the Internet facilitates the dissemination of conspiracy theories in a way not possible before, their implicit premise is that in a more connected world people take cues from what others are doing and that ill-formed ideas may be more likely to spread through horizontal networks because traditional informational authorities don't dominate the online communication flow. In short, ideas can 'go viral'. Social scientists have formalised the mechanism of how ideas and behaviours go viral in the literature on herd behaviour and information cascades.

The formal theory of herd behaviour is highly technical but the core idea is not (Banerjee 1992). The core idea is that when people make judgments in spite of limited information, they sometimes look to the behaviour of others in forming their own opinions rather than exercising independent judgment. A herd forms when lots of people forgo making independent judgments and conform to collective behaviour.

Conspiracy theories are ideas of uncertain merits (Keeley 1999), and evaluating a conspiracy theory inherently involves making judgments in a limited information context (Rosnow *et al.* 1988). Individuals vary in how sceptical they are of any given conspiracy theory (Uscinski *et al.* 2016). All else being equal, it is reasonable to think that the theory is plausible; it is also reasonable to be very sceptical of the theory. The literature on herd behaviour suggests that when faced with decision-making in limited information contexts as

occurs when confronted with a conspiracy theory, people would look to what others are doing in forming their own opinions and this creates the potential for herd behaviour.

In this section, we look for evidence that herd behaviour drives the spread of conspiracy theories in the same way that herd behaviour has been found to drive financial bubbles (Akerlof and Shiller 2015), revolutions (Lohmann 1994), and fashion fads (Bikhchandani *et al.* 1992). We show there is little evidence of widespread herd behaviour involved in the dissemination of conspiracy theories. We explain with reference to social science theory why herding is not prevalent.

To get a mental picture of herd behaviour, imagine ever more people listening to a trending song on Apple Music. Each person who listens may give the merits of the song little thought but take an interest based on what the crowd is doing, and in joining the crowd, each of these people then makes the trend even stronger and more attractive to others even though they have added no new information or judgment to the signal communicated by the crowd's behaviour.

The same herd-like process could evolve for the spread of ideas on the Internet—conspiratorial and otherwise. To investigate this, we need a way to measure interest in an idea. Daily searches on services such as Google provide just such a measure. If public interest in an idea is increasing, this will coincide with an increase in the number of Google searches. Indeed, studies of search traffic have been used to outperform expert forecasters on matters of public opinion, public health, and the adoption of technological products (Abramowicz 2008).

To get sense of a search pattern that would be consistent with herd behaviour, let us look at a current trendy idea, 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness proponents contend that there are health and other benefits associated with paying attention to one's subjective experience. Our goal here is not to impugn mindfulness. Instead, we want to show what a contemporary idea that spreads virally would look like in terms of the search traffic it produces. Figure 5.1 charts weekly Google searches for 'mindfulness' from 2008 to 2015. This plot shows a pattern that is consistent with herd behaviour. More and more people take an interest in mindfulness as they see others engage the idea. Though there are other dynamics that could explain this plot and it is not proof that herding is taking place, the exponential pattern of growth exhibited in the plot is consistent with idea propagation through a viral process. More importantly for our current purposes, absence of the exponential pattern of growth exhibited in Figure 5.1 would be disconfirming of a viral propagation process.

Now that we have described the search trend that a viral process will produce, we turn to the question of whether conspiracy theories spread through this process. At first cut, it seems likely that herd behaviour could explain the spread of conspiracy theories by means of the Internet. So we investigated

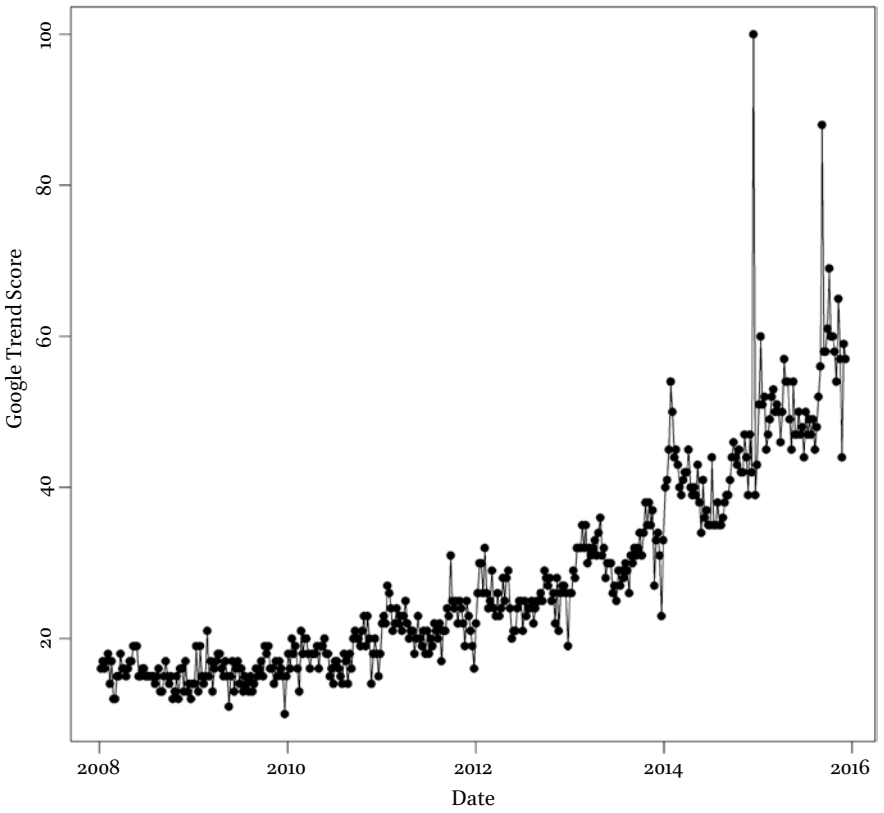

FIGURE 5.1 Google searches for "Mindfullness," 2008–15.

search traffic on Google and Wikipedia to look for indications of conspiracy theories spreading virally. None of the past decade's major conspiracy theories that we are aware of exhibited the indications of a viral process. Instead, with each conspiracy theory, we observe very short bursts of interest as is consistent with dissemination through a hierarchical process in which information flows through centralised actors to specific groups.

Consider the case of the 'Birthers' and their interest in President Barack Obama's birth certificate. The Figure 5.2 shows weekly Google search traffic for the term "Obama's birth certificate" between 2008 and 2015. As is evident in the plot, interest in the Birther thesis was prominent in the weeks before the 2008 election and then declined to almost nothing. Interest picks up again in 2011 because Donald Trump resurrected the theory, but as before, it quickly died out. There's no pattern of exponential growth here. As with the other conspiracy theories we have analysed, interest in the Birther thesis spikes when major

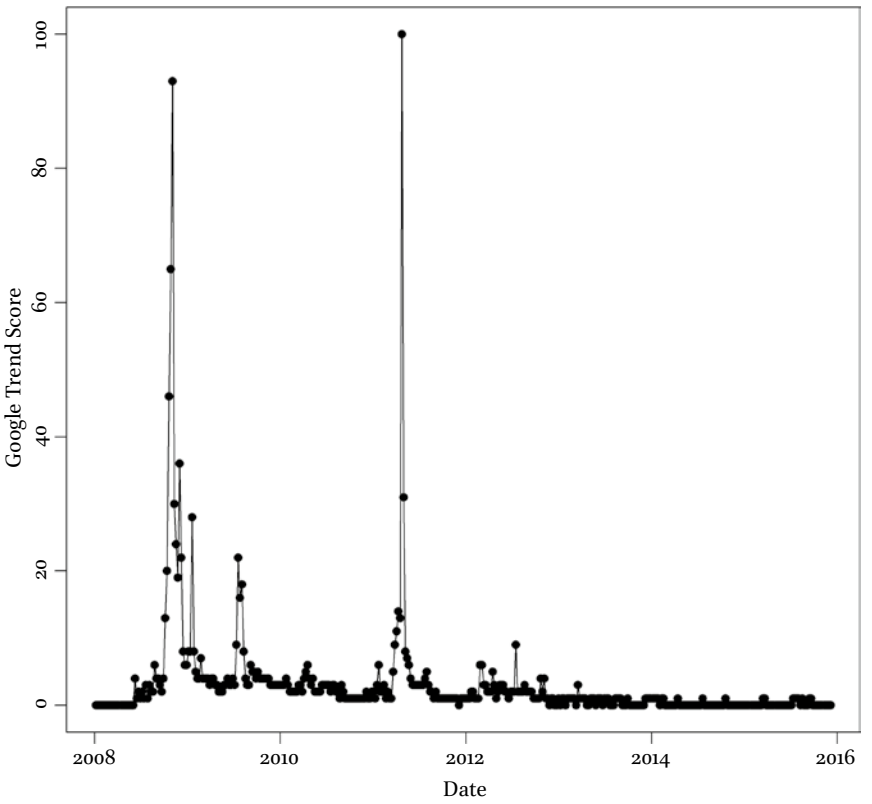

FIGURE 5.2 Google searches for "Obama's Birth Certificate," 2008–15.

media organisations pay attention to the idea and evaporates when they do not. After attention from the media, the idea does not spread like a virus with more and more people falling victim. This is likely because, as other studies show, partisan cues play a large part in determining who will believe in this political conspiracy theory (Pasek *et al.* 2015 Berinsky 2010).

While some ideas (like mindfulness) become fads that spread virally, conspiratorial ideas tend not to. Why is this? One possibility is that it is exceedingly unlikely that any idea takes hold and becomes a fad. Though this is true, the theoretical literature on herd behaviour suggests that there are even deeper reasons that conspiracy theories are weak candidates for viral transmission. Specifically, there are two principal reasons why it would not be expected for herd behaviour to spread conspiracy theories: lack of anonymity and fragility.

First, in cases where the herding dynamic has been obtained, individuals react to the size of the crowd without knowing details about the beliefs and information of those within it (Easley and Kleinberg 2010). In our Apple Music

example, all you know is the number of people who have played the song. You know nothing about the tastes of the individuals within that population. When people are exposed to conspiracy theories about the economic and political world, the encounter almost always involves contextual cues about the beliefs of the person sharing the idea. While some people could falsify their preferences and present conspiratorial evidence on a neutral-looking website, we are unaware of this ever being effective and it seems implausible that this would be successful in generating lasting attention. The bottom line is that most political actors that ordinary people are exposed to are not deceptive about their basic belief systems. For instance, Birthers do not hide the fact that they are from the Tea Party movement. As a result, individuals not sympathetic to the Tea Party will discount their argument. Because in encountering information about conspiracy theories online you observe contextual cues about people's beliefs, whatever opinion a person forms is unlikely to involve blindly following the crowd. Most people will make use of contextual cues in evaluating the information (Zaller 1992; Lupia 1994).

Second, herd behaviour is fragile. Herding can result from limited information. When you listen to the trending song on Apple Music, you may know nothing about it but you cause it to trend all the more. While adding nothing to the collective wisdom, you cause others to perceive an even more impressive crowd. A big crowd could be the result of a snowball event—possibly instigated by an ad campaign—rather than a reflection of choices made on the basis of independent information. But crowd behaviour devoid of informational substance is fragile; herds tend to fall apart quickly when new information is put forth. For example, a prominent music critic can write a negative review of the song trending on Apple Music and subsequent potential downloaders may ignore the size of the crowd in light of this new information. That herd behaviour is fragile is especially consequential because the more socially important a herd starts to become, the more incentive rival actors have to put forth disconfirming evidence. Thus, conspiratorial ideas in the embryonic stage of going viral tend to get stymied (Clarke 2007). For better or worse, it is much easier for inconsequential things such as pictures of kittens to overcome the implicit fragility of herd behaviour than it is for consequential political ideas. Kitten pictures go viral, conspiracy theories tend not to.

4 Conclusion

The Internet is blamed for many things, conspiracy theories being just one. One can quickly Google a conspiracy theory that explains anything (and even everything, if you are lucky). This does not mean that most people are doing

that. It is easy to come across conspiracy theories, even in casual net browsing. But that does not mean that these conspiracy theories are presented in a positive manner, or are changing people's minds. There have likely been millions of conspiracy theories that have come and gone in the night with little notice. Only very few attract enough believers to catch popular notice. It is the frenzy that surrounds those few that drives misperceptions about the whole.

There is little systematic evidence to show that the world is more conspiratorial now than it was prior to the advent of the Internet. There is little evidence to show that the processes that keep people from believing in conspiracy theories have changed either. When information comes without strong cues, people will accept it until they receive other cues—political or otherwise—that leads people to reject it (see, for example, Berinsky 2015). When information comes with strong source cues—as conspiracy theories usually do—the likelihood of that conspiracy theory attracting large numbers of followers is slim.

This study focuses on the USA, and it is worth noting that political thought in the United States appears more sceptical of conspiracy theories than political thought in some other countries (Bratich 2004). There seems to exist a mainstream norm of anti-conspiracy thinking in the USA: through socialisation processes, most people begin to trust political institutions at an early age. Nevertheless, many citizens—to one degree or another—are not socialised to mainstream political values (see, for example, Avery 2006) and others have psychological traits that overwhelm mainstream socialising influences (Dagnall *et al.* 2015; Miller *et al.* 2016). A study in other regions—perhaps in authoritarian or post-authoritarian states, states with multiple or intertwined factions of elites, and emerging states—may yield different results.

With this said, people, regardless of where they are from, have mental filters that help them sort through the millions of 'inputs' they receive each day. Just because a conspiracy theory exists somewhere does not mean that anyone will go to find it, or believe it if they do.

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PART 2

Correspondences

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CHAPTER 6

The Satanism Scare in Apartheid South Africa

Nicky Falkof

1 Introduction

During the last years of apartheid rule in South Africa, approximately the decade from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, many white South Africans were caught up in a collective moral panic about the threat posed by Satanism, understood to be an organised, wealthy, global and bloodthirsty cult that aimed to overthrow civilised society and Christianity in one fell swoop.

Manifestations of concerns about Satanism appeared among ordinary white people as well as those "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker 1995) who held a certain degree of social power and had some capacity to direct national narratives. Newspaper and magazine editors plastered stories about Satanic rituals across their front pages; police gave press conferences informing the public about Satanic murders from which no bodies were ever recovered; politicians from the ruling National Party made rabble-rousing speeches blaming Satanism for the ills of the nation; panicked parents wrote letters to the press and demanded that something be done about the Satanic menace; meanwhile, rebellious teenagers scrawled demonic symbols over their school books and bags and played heavy metal music from scratchy, third-hand cassette tapes, embodying in plain sight the Satanist menace that seemed to be overshadowing the (white) nation's future.

South Africa's Satanic panic was just one of a number of Satanism scares that occurred globally during the 1980s and early 1990s. It was a minor phenomenon that may seem barely relevant when compared to the seismic social change that was sweeping South Africa at the time. However, it would be overly simplistic to dismiss white South African fears of Satanism as just a meaningless blip on the cultural horizon, especially given the weight of press coverage that these fears were afforded over a long period of time, when so many more newsworthy events occurred to fill the daily papers. Rather than being a meaningless instance of mass hysteria or collective delusion, the panic was in fact importantly symptomatic of some of the ways in which whiteness responded to the looming end of apartheid and, concurrently, to the threatened collapse of white privilege (although few white South Africans at the time would have phrased it thus). The rhetoric of the Satanism scare illustrates

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some of the major concerns of the period: as well as drawing on longstanding Cold War paranoias about communism (discussed in detail below), its solipsistic, self-referential insistence on the whiteness of the imagined Satanist was yet another act of turning away from black Africans, a centring of threats to whiteness within a frame of whiteness.

This chapter uses contemporary press material about alleged Satanic episodes to argue that Satanism in late apartheid South Africa meant something very particular within the white imaginary. I discuss Satanic cult rumours first with regards to religion, one of the driving forces behind the Afrikaner *volksgees*, or folk spirit, that was used to justify apartheid's separating legislation. I am interested less in whether Satanism was imagined to be a legitimate religious force than in how intertwined it was with Christianity, and particularly the conservative Christianity that characterised the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK/Dutch Reformed Church), the main Afrikaner church that was so deeply involved with creating the ideologies of apartheid that it was sometimes known as the "National Party at prayer" (Crapanzano 1985: 104). Second, I consider Satanism in South Africa as a conspiracy theory and rumour, propagated by privileged moral entrepreneurs, disseminated via the press and passed around between parents, teachers, and other concerned adults, and as an idea that layered on top of existing anxieties about threats to the nation.

Together, these analyses show how the Satanic panic in South Africa performed certain socio-psychic functions for those sections of the population who were most invested in it. White concern about Satanism in the late apartheid period was a symptom of the many anxieties brought on by political change. It helped to defer fears of the more legitimate threat posed to white complacency by African nationalism, and of the imagined disastrous consequences of black rule. It was, too, part of a series of ongoing contestations between different positions within the white electorate, while at the same time operating as a mode of collective identity formation, offering up an abject folk devil that could be easily blamed for social instability. The Satanic panic cohered already-existing fears of dangerous others into a phantasmic threat of supernatural disorder. And, perhaps most importantly, its lurid, sensational stories gave white people a narrative, a way to explain what was, to so many, the confusing, frightening and alienating process of the slow collapse of apartheid, and of the political mythology that had held it together.

2 Apartheid and Its Ending

South Africa during the period in question was undergoing almost unimaginable social and political upheavals. This was a country that had, first under

colonial law and later under the system of apartheid initiated in 1948, been subject to ever more stringent segregationist legislation designed to enforce racial classification and separation that ensured the protection of resources for whites and the availability of cheap black labour for the mines, farms, and suburban homes that allowed the comfort of those whites. Black South Africans were forcibly moved from complex, vibrant, urban communities into dusty townships[1] or the so-called homelands—small, usually arid areas of the country set aside for tribal groupings that were determined by the state—and refused access to cities unless they were employed by whites. Part of the mode of enforcement of this geographical and economic separation was the notorious pass book system, whereby black people were legally obliged to carry documents signed by their white employers, without which they could be thrown in jail and/or summarily deported 'home' to far-off places they may have had little or no relation to, on the basis of a sometimes arbitrary tribal classification that took no account of personal history or family ties. Apartheid South Africa's laws were designed to protect white people from any possibility of social equivalence with their black countrymen and to ensure that black South Africans did not attain the full citizenship that might threaten white economic privilege.

Apartheid's obscene norms impacted on white as well as on black people. Colonial beliefs about black 'barbarism' and white superiority combined with strict censorship, enforced conscription and militarisation, a deeply conservative schooling system and a powerful Afrikaner hold over government and institutions to reinforce injunctions to "conformist group discipline" (van der Westhuizen 2007: 293) that characterised white life. Many white people were accustomed to thinking of themselves as part of a southern outpost of European civilization, which had to be protected at all costs from the depredations of a slowly decolonising Africa. Criticism of the system, no matter how small, was often equated to betrayal and even "race suicide" (Bederman 1995: 202). Church and state colluded in creating a political mythology that portrayed apartheid as a system of benevolent guardianship that would allow black cultures to grow 'at their own pace' while remaining separate from superior white society; this was a myth that many complacent white people conveniently chose to believe, although signs to the contrary were not hard to see for those who cared to look.

The period in question, however, was one of major disruption. It was characterised by three successive states of emergency, violent repression of African

1 Township is the name given by apartheid's engineers to the dense, infrastructurally challenged black settlements that dotted the areas around towns and cities, the only urban areas in which black South Africans were permitted to live. Townships are still a common feature of South African geography and a testament to the racialised character of the country's ongoing inequality.

liberation movements, armed resistance, civil disobedience and internal violence that were becoming increasing difficult to ignore; as well as sanctions, international pressure and the dawning realisation among businesspeople that apartheid was dangerously bad for the economy. The self-serving solipsisms of whiteness were becoming ever more tenuous: in the face of such upheavals it was difficult to maintain the fiction of the morality of white government and the system of 'separate development'. Many whites were confronted with what felt like the impossibility of imagining South Africa under majority rule, an idea that had long been associated with the worst excesses of the racist imagination, from the violent nationalisation of assets to the mass rape of white women and out-and-out race war. White dominance was facing serious threats, but many white people were unable to process or face these, habituated by forty years of National Party rule to assume that black South Africans were constitutionally inferior and should not be taken seriously as political actors. The Satanism scare was born in this climate of fear, paranoia, denial and disavowal.

3 Satanism and Religion

Satanism scares are by no means confined to South Africa. Indeed, during the 1980s and 1990s they seemed almost commonplace. Countries including Morocco, Lebanon, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt experienced scares that associated heavy metal music with Satanism (Hjelm *et al.* 2012: 11), while such events recurred in Scandinavia (Hjelm *et al.* 2009) and in various parts of Africa (Frankfurter 2006).

During this period major Satanic panics took place in the USA, UK, and elsewhere in Europe. These took two main forms, which were conceptually related but seldom appeared within the same episodes. In some cases they featured moral panics about youth culture and popular music. Concerns about 'backmasking'—Satanic messages encoded in rock and pop records that could only be heard when played backwards—were common, as were fears about the pernicious influence of horror films, some of which became paradigmatic examples of the dangers that lurked in popular culture.[2]

2 In South Africa these concerns manifested in theologians' claims that the music of a dissident group of Afrikaner rockers, known as the Voëlvry musicians, contained backmasked messages, and the repeated assumption popularised by cult cops and moral entrepreneurs that films such as *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*—both still banned at the time—were responsible for leading youngsters into Satanism.

Other episodes, largely confined to the USA and UK, related to fears about paedophile rings and child abuse. The founding text of those events appears to be *Michelle Remembers* (Smith and Pazder 1981), a sensational tale that relates how psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder helped chronic depressive Michelle Smith dredge up memories of a year of childhood abuse at the hands of her Satanist mother's coven. The book was later discredited as being largely a product of Smith's imagination (Allen and Midwinter 1990); nonetheless the seed was planted, and tales of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of Satanist groups began to appear with increasing frequency.

In the mid-1980s, practitioners and interested parties began to speak about Satanic ritual abuse (SRA), a new form of child abuse granted its own acronym, specialists, survivors' networks, websites, talk show episodes, books and dedicated psychiatric establishment. By 1986, therapists at the International Conference on Multiple Personality/Disassociation in Chicago noticed that about a quarter of their patients were recovering memories of abuse by Satanic cults. That year there was one paper delivered on SRA; the following year there were eleven (Showalter 1997: 171). SRA soon caught the attention of the media and a series of scandalous cases ensued, featuring "sensational investigations by well-meaning but overzealous police, doctors and social workers, who performed rectal and genital examinations on the children, invited them to demonstrate what happened with anatomically correct dolls, and asked leading questions" (Showalter 1997: 172). In one widely cited description, ritual abuse was defined as "repetitive and systematic sexual, physical, and psychological abuse of children by adults as part of cult or satanic worship" (quoted in Frankfurter 2001: 356). A number of publications added to the mounting panic. One of the last of these was *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse*, edited by the psychotherapist Valerie Sinason, who equated SRA with other forms of once-ignored child abuse that had had to fight for public acknowledgment (Sinason 1994: 2). Sinason was a respected clinical practitioner, whose dedication to tackling the Satanic menace took her as far as South Africa.[3]

Despite constant media attention, no real proof of these Satanic conspiracies was ever uncovered. In the USA and UK an embarrassing number of high-profile prosecutions relating to child sexual abuse in day-care centres and nurseries collapsed amidst an almost complete lack of evidence. A 1994 report commissioned by the British government and written by anthropologist

3 While Sinason has never recanted her position on SRA, it has been excised from her official biography. Her current website refers to her as a "poet, writer, child psychotherapist and adult psychoanalyst." It mentions her professional positions and cites a number of publications, none of them related to SRA or Satanism (Clinic for Disassociative Studies n.d.).

Jean LaFontaine found nothing to support any accusations of Satanism or SRA (Showalter 1997: 173). The US Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion performed a similar task, eventually concluding, "These allegations are tall pillars of nonsense built on the slippery sands of unreason and it doesn't take too hard a shove to topple them" (quoted in Ivey 1993: 182). A 1994 report for the US National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect stated that "religion-related abuse is actually more common than Satanic abuse … there are many more children being abused in the name of God than in the name of Satan" (Goodman *et al.* 1994: 15).

Scares of this kind did of course relate to religion—Sinason spoke explicitly of Satanists "[worshipping] Satan as their god" (1994: 3) and many accusations of Satanism came from within evangelical Christian communities (for example Wright 1994)—but they were also powerfully tied to discourses and institutions of psychiatry, mental health and child abuse. In this sense, South Africa's Satanic panic was importantly different.[4]

4 Psychiatry and Psychotherapy in South Africa

Press material on Satanism in South Africa barely mentions SRA.[5] Indeed, the role of psychiatry and psychiatric diagnoses in cases of supposed Satanism was explicitly, and repeatedly, denied in the coverage. In one episode, after a 16-year-girl in the town of Bloemfontein shot at her mother, father, and brother during full moon, a Reverend Francois du Toit took it upon himself to 'investigate' Satanism in his community. He came to the conclusion that the girl was "a completely normal child. There is nothing strange about her and what happened to her cannot be explained in psychiatric terms" (*Star*, September 11, 1985). A young woman named Charlotte, interviewed for a popular family magazine

4 Stories about Satanism are, of course, prevalent across Africa. These are often indistinguishable from witchcraft and part of larger indigenous occult cosmologies. According to Frankfurter, "Witch panics in contemporary Africa cannot be understood apart from individual regions' particular encounters with modernity, with global economies and with new notions of power and exploitation" (2006: 4). The Satanism scare that I am concerned with here was framed in terms of a religious war between good and evil, between God and the Devil, adopting Christian discourses rather than African supernatural beliefs, with little relation to issues of modernity or the "occult economies" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) that characterise these beliefs among Africans. Despite its location, then, late apartheid South African Satanism is more usefully compared to similar panics in the West than elsewhere in Africa.

5 One of the few exceptions is an article reporting on a visit that Sinason made to South Africa, during which she insisted that "psychologists, police and parents should take seriously their children's reports of satanic abuse rather than dismissing them as fantasy" (*Weekend Argus*, April 2, 1994).

that was at the forefront of the anti-Satanist crusade, told a "shocking" story of being lured in to Satanism after playing an occult game called glassy-glassy, an impromptu variant of the more familiar Ouija board, that "allowed an evil spirit to take control of me. It had entered my body and possessed me." Charlotte exhibited many of the familiar bogeymen that were associated with the Satanism scare. She indulged in youthful sexual and social behaviours that were seen to be deviant, such as homosexuality, drug taking, and spending time at nightclubs. Her cultural habits were also associated with dangerous, unruly youth, as she developed a taste for 'alternative' music, usually described in the literature as imported from the decadent West and unsuited to the conservative, family-focused milieu of white South Africa. Like other apparently 'recovered' Satanists whose stories appeared in popular periodicals, she only escaped with the assistance of an evangelical church:

> I was treated by one of Natal's top psychologists, who could do nothing to help me. My problem was not mental but spiritual … If only I hadn't been so naïve about the reality of sprits and demons … Through Christ I have been set free from demons. Satanism is no joke.
>
> *Personality*, August 8, 1988

Discussing a murder trial where the judge in the case had rejected the accused's claims that they had been possessed by Satan, a Pastor Gerhard Kotze, who had "previously worked with the police investigating satanic practices," told the *Sunday Star*, "Psychiatrists say the devil is a psychological concept—that's what you're up against when you're trying to convince people of the reality of demonic manifestations" (September 27, 1992). A much-cited 1990 book titled *Satanism: The Seduction of South Africa's Youth* stated, "Satanism is not a psychological or psychiatric problem; it is a spiritual problem. We have never seen anyone who has been set free from Satanism by psychology or therapy" (Gardiner and Gardiner 1990: 9).[6] The book also claimed that a clinical diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia actually proved that the patient in question had been abused by Satanists (125).

Psychiatry and mental health had no role to play in a panic in which demons entered the body and 'forced' vulnerable young people to rebel against apartheid's conformist, homophobic, militarised behavioural injunctions.[7]

6 The title of this text is likely a reference to US evangelist Bob Larson's *Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth* (1989).

7 Interestingly, as I have discussed at length elsewhere (Falkof 2012), this prohibition did not apply to black youth, who were quickly pathologised and medicalised as hysterical or mentally ill when affected by incidents that may otherwise have been considered possession.

Rather than thinking of these behaviours as potentially rebellious and/or pathological responses to social conservatism, the white polis imagined them to be a consequence of possession, of external forces; and thus further deferred the possibility that young South Africans could be intentionally moving away from the quotidian and ideological conservatism that characterised their society, and that was imagined to be vitally necessary to maintaining the discipline that kept the threat of 'uncivilised' Africa at bay.

Where SRA claims used psychiatry to uncover and treat instances of alleged ritual abuse, South African anti-Satanist claims specifically repudiated psychiatry in favour of religion. Exorcism was the chosen means of recovery for many of the Satan-hunters. Major Kobus Jonker, the first head of the South African police force's Occult-Related Crimes Unit and most prolific of the so-called "cult cops" (Crouch and Damphousse 1991) who drove the scare, was an evangelical Christian who believed that one needed to be "strong in faith" to fight Satanism (*Financial Times*, July 30, 2004) and repeated the notion that only exorcism could save those who had been affected. At one point in the scare, Jonker and Neville Goldman, an evangelical pastor specialising in exorcisms who claimed to have once been a Satanist, "joined forces to destroy the cult" (*Eastern Province Herald*, April 20, 1990). Like most of those involved in propagating the scare, Jonker's crusade against evil was deeply motivated by his personal faith:

> One day I realised I had to save myself from my sins and I handed my life over to God … I have seen so much which involves devil worship. It is happening and innocent people are being trapped in a hell on earth … My private hours are spent helping parents whose children have been caught in the grip of the occult.
>
> *Weekend Argus*, May 25, 1990

Another self-proclaimed expert, this time a "psychic astrologer" who had studied the occult for many years, told a newspaper:

> The difference between Satanism and black magic is that Satanists actually worship Lucifer … while black magicians … work directly with dark forces using blood and sex rituals. Exorcism is not fighting evil with evil. Exorcism is a process of invoking the Light.
>
> *Star*, August 15, 1988

In some instances, psychiatrists themselves suggested that exorcism would have been the appropriate course of action for their patients. In one case, a young man was admitted to the notorious 1 Military Hospital, a medical

institution that was used to discipline and control army conscripts who took drugs, were gay, refused to fight, or were otherwise "undesirable" (van Zyl *et al.* 1999). Under observation, he told a series of astonishing stories about his upbringing in a Satanist cult, including pledging his soul to the "Prince of Darkness" at a young age and witnessing animal sacrifices and the ritual drawing of blood from humans. Reporting on the episode, one of his doctors admitted that he had "never before felt so impotent with psychiatry than with this patient," and said, "I wonder whether the beginning should have begun [sic] not with psychiatry but with an exorcist." Another agreed, "We had reached the limits of psychotherapy. There was nothing we could do for him" (*Star*, July 3, 1986).

Rather than adults recalling repressed memories of childhood Satanic abuse or children following carers' leads to make accusations of abuse, as in other locations, victims of Satanism in South Africa were often spoken of as being actually possessed. According to one article in a respected newspaper, "Christian ministers and priests across all denominations believe that Satan can infiltrate people and possess their souls. And the only way to rid that person of demons is through exorcism" (*Sunday Star*, October 24, 1993). In the murder trial mentioned above, the judge stated that "the court accepted that people could become possessed by demons," but was not convinced it had happened in that case (*Citizen*, March 1, 1994).[8]

Satanism in South Africa, then, rested on belief in the presence of supernatural demons whose nefarious activities could only be resisted with the power of Christ. Satanists worked in the service of these demons, and of Satan himself, who was depicted as empirically real and an active threat to the survival of the white nation. Thus, as well as being treated as a religion, Satanism served to invigorate certain structures of Christianity.

5 The Church and the Devil

The NGK had long been a major proponent of and apologist for the state's desire to enforce racial segregation, as shown in its official missionary policy of 1935:

> The Church declares itself unequivocally opposed to [racial] fusion and to all that would give rise to it, but, on the other hand, as little begrudges the Native and Coloured a social status as honourable as he can

8 I discuss this case at length elsewhere (Falkof 2012).

> reach … While the church thus declares itself to be opposed to social equality in the sense of ignoring differences of race or colour between black and white in daily life, it favours the encouragement and development of social differentiation and intellectual or cultural segregation … The policy of trusteeship … must gradually develop into a policy of complete independence and self-determination for the Coloured and Native in his own community, school and church.[9]
>
> Quoted in SPARKS 1990: 161

By the period in question, the NGK had begun to detach itself from these political aims and was attempting to reconfigure itself as a more modern and less racist institution. However, its association with stern, dour, paternalistic, Afrikaner Calvinism was difficult to shift, and congregations began to shrink as white South Africans moved towards more sympathetic denominations. Priests who performed exorcisms came from newer evangelical groups such as the Lighthouse Christian Centre and Rhema Church (*Weekend Argus*, March 5, 1994), while the traditional church avoided such "mystical" practices: "the NGK does not as a rule perform exorcisms or demon deliverance" (*Star*, July 4, 1988). To many, this was a further sign that the NGK was losing relevance as it was incapable of fighting off this new spiritual menace.

The Satanism scare thus became a site of conflict between older and newer forms of Christianity. As in other locations, "Satanic cult stories are ideological weapons in a conflict among Christians, traditionalists versus modernists" (Victor 1991: 234). This mirrored the battles that were going on within white South Africa as a whole, between modernisers, who supported the National Party's pragmatic and self-serving attempts at 'reform', and traditionalists, who abandoned the seemingly conciliatory NP for new, further right groups. The NP garnered around 80 per cent of the Afrikaner vote in the 1970s but close to half of those voters switched their allegiance in the 1987 election, with the Conservative Party gaining 26 per cent and the Herstigte Nasionale Party (Purified National Party) earning 30 per cent of the overall white vote (Hugo 1988: 16).

Also significant here is the *type* of religion that the Satanism scare drew on and related to. The iconographies of contemporary Satanism scares are clearly drawn from European Christian tradition. They include Black Masses, upside

9 The term 'coloured' in South Africa is one of four apartheid-era racial classifications that remains in common use today and is for many a marker of a particular, often marginalised identity. 'Coloured' was the designation for mixed race and many such communities trace their ancestry from indigenous San nomads or from Malay traders who arrived during the early colonial period (see Erasmus 2001).

down crucifixes, and other Christian symbolism that is said to be both inverted and perverted within the Satanist's ritualistic practice. But there are, of course, other forms of religion that are pervasive within South Africa. The country has a long history of indigenous belief that proved remarkably resilient to colonial and apartheid attempts to eradicate it, or at the least to sanitise it and make it palatable to Europeans (Hund 2004: 68). During the late 1990s, the idea of the Satanist was subsumed into this larger African cosmology (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) and became one of many potential occult folk devils that stalked the post-apartheid landscape. Those Satanists, who still populate the front pages of tabloid newspapers such as the *Daily Sun*, are just one more manifestation of the dangerous magical landscape of South Africa, and have no connection to global cults and conspiracies. Their threat is localised: they attack individual people rather than aiming to destabilise society as a whole. However, during the period in question Satanists were almost always imagined to be white and seldom had any relation to practices of indigenous magic such as the veneration of ancestors and use of herbal medicine.

Satanism was described as an evil worldwide plot, a genuine and serious threat to the stability of the South African republic; and yet it replicated apartheid's separating urges, keeping black and white apart, with no interest in the concurrent panics around *muti* (indigenous magical practice) and other forms of local belief that were blamed for ritual murders and violent attacks on accused witches—crimes that actually did take place.[10] Indeed, scholars have shown that white fears of Satanism were actually concurrent with a rise in *muti* murders and other ritual killings among black South Africans (Chidester 1991: 59). South Africa was already home to an occult imaginary that was long-standing and indigenous and known to be the source of actual violent crime. Given this scenario, the hysterical insistence within the Satanic panic that this was a vicious scheme emerging in contradistinction to European Christianity and run solely by whites actually suggested that the greatest threat to white South Africa was internal rather than external. The imbrication of Satanism and Christianity, the overdetermined collective focus on Satanism as dangerous to the religious (and thus moral) health of the nation, actually served as a disavowal mechanism, a way for some whites to avoid the disconcerting knowledge that black South Africans' legitimate demands for social justice and political participation could unsettle, or even completely topple, a state that was built on protecting white ignorance and economic privilege.

10 See, for example, Clifton Crais (2002) on the prevalence of so-called witchcraft murders during South Africa's political transition.

This, then, is one of the things the Satanism scare did in South Africa, one of the purposes it served: it allowed for a collective act of displacement from the terrifying unknown of African nationalism, with all its attendant implications (effectively marketed by apartheid propaganda) of race war, economic disaster, and "Zimbabwe-fication," in favour of a more manageable folk devil, one that, for all the horror its supernatural potential connoted, could be both known and dealt with. As an internal rather than an external threat the white Satanist could be exorcised, prayed at, redeemed and neutralised using the faith in the superior morality of white South Africa that had played such an important part in portraying apartheid as a system of benevolent guardianship.

6 Satanism and Conspiracy Theory

Karl Popper wrote of what he called the "conspiracy theory of society":

> [Conspiracy theory] is the view that whatever happens in society—including things which people as a rule dislike, such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages—are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups.
>
> POPPER 1959: 281

What this suggests is a fundamental sense of social insecurity, a lack of trust in the supposed facts of the world disseminated by those in power: politicians, police, the media and other major structures.[11] Conspiracy theories can be "one possible response in struggles over meaning, legitimacy, purity, and power. Conspiracy theories thrive on the dialectics of distrust, stigmatization and conflict" (Dyrendal 2016: 198). Apartheid South Africa, with its incessant anxieties, endemic internal conflict and endless struggles over meaning (both intra-white and inter-racial and -cultural), was fertile ground for such imaginings. White culture at the end of apartheid was particularly primed for the absorption of such ideas after a series of revelations about state misbehaviour, most significantly the so-called information scandal of the late 1970s, when two journalists from the left-wing English language newspaper *Rand Daily Mail* revealed that the government had been laundering state funds and using them to fight a covert propaganda war in the USA. The scandal sent shockwaves

11 This lack of trust can, of course, sometimes be legitimate, as in cases when conspiracy theories turn out to reveal actual conspiracies, like for example the Watergate scandal.

through South African society, causing then-president John Vorster and his co-conspirators' fall from power (Rees and Day 1980) and severely denting public faith in the trustworthiness of the National Party.

Anita Waters posits a useful understanding of conspiracy theories as ethno-sociologies, "the theories that ordinary people use to explain social phenomena" (1997: 114). She suggests that these ideas are *narratives*, stories that develop collectively and that are used to understand events that seem inexplicable, frightening, unlikely, biased, or otherwise unreasonable. Within the frame of the conspiracy theory it becomes clear that

> since the world is controlled and dominated by powerful groups or clandestine international organizations or secret agencies or experts, individuals cannot … influence or change the state of affairs. Such an attitude is characteristic of marginalized and victimized groups.
>
> DONSKIS 1998: 358

It may seem somewhat disingenuous to describe white South Africans in this way: this was, after all, a group that was the beneficiary of significant state protection of income, housing, employment, living space and other components of class stability. Nonetheless, many white South Africans, especially during the last years of apartheid, *felt* like a marginalised and victimised group. Many whites, encrusted with years of racist propaganda about innate black violence, laziness, resentment and incompetence, did in fact feel that they were a small minority that was comparatively powerless against the massed forces of uncivilised, amoral and rapacious black South Africa. In a 1987 study, 78 per cent of white Afrikaners and 70 per cent of white English-speakers agreed that black majority rule would mean that "the physical safety of whites would be threatened" while 85 per cent of Afrikaners and 60 per cent of English-speakers agreed that "white women would be molested by blacks" (Hugo 1988: 585). Hugo compares this "racial demonology" to the hysterical panics that occurred when white groups faced anti-colonial uprisings in other African countries: Algeria, Angola, Kenya, Congo, Zaire. In this worldview, despite the whites' social, political and economic power they were indeed at the risk of both marginalisation and victimisation, and thus perfectly suited to the development of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories that became attached to Satanism provided the scare with some of its affect rather than forming its primary core. As explained above, the scare manifested at base in a religiously motivated fear of the devil, an actual occult power directing events to the detriment of white Christian South Africans, which allowed for a collective disavowal of the real political

forces that were unsettling white life. Secondary to the empirical presence of the devil were those who worked on his behalf, and it is in this respect that the element of conspiracy came to the fore.

Throughout the scare, Satanism was referred to as a 'cult', an evocative term that suggests centralised organisation and the presence of leaders (although there was no explicit speculation as who these may have been), which in turn strengthens the possibility of conspiracy. After discovering a house that was allegedly a centre of Satanist activity, Jonker told the press, "Evidence I found … has proved that Satanism is rife countrywide and whoever is behind it is running a top-class organisation" (*Weekend Argus*, May 9, 1990). Stories about Satanism continually referenced the fact that members had social standing and cultural capital. The rise in Satanist activity in Bloemfontein was said to be the fault of a well-known and wealthy local lawyer, who was the cult's "warlock" (*Sunday Star*, September 8, 1985). Police told the press that they had uncovered evidence that "professional people and community leaders" (*Cape Times*, May 19, 1990) as well as at least one teacher and headmaster (*Weekend Post*, May 19, 1990) were involved in Eastern Cape Satanist "cells."

The access that these insiders had was showed by the alleged composition of the Satanist cult, which was said to be recruiting from the most elite—and thus the most influential—sectors of white society. A psychologist revealed that "devil worship and the occult [had] gained alarming popularity among schoolchildren in Johannesburg's affluent northern suburbs," with the country's most privileged youth indulging in sex, drugs and sadomasochism, sacrificing family pets, and even spreading animal blood on the sandwiches they took to school (*Star*, September 18, 1992). Jonker claimed to have "smashed" a Satanist group in a wealthy suburb of Pretoria: "at least 60 pupils were involved … including the children of high-ranking officials" (*Cape Times*, September 7, 1994).

7 Confession, Infection, Communism

People who claimed to have once been Satanists made a point of informing press and other actors that Satanists were intentionally enlisting young people. Two Durban Satanists "who are struggling to break free of the evil influences of their cult, have warned young people that recruiters are waiting for a chance to lure them into corruption" (*Sunday Tribune*, October 2, 1988). Priests tasked with the pastoral care of young white men conscripted into apartheid's army revealed that Satanist soldiers were using the South African Defence Force to lure their comrades into Satanism: "One Satanist told a chaplain that

his mission had been to 'win' over the whole August 1990 intake of national servicemen for Satan" (*Sunday Times*, June 30, 1990). Another alleged Satanist gloated, "We get them younger and younger. We get the girls easily at discos and clubs. Give them a few drugs and then we've got them" (Gardiner and Gardiner 1990: 18). Others talked of "recruiting" adolescents at malls and nightclubs (*Citizen*, September 7, 1994). Claims about the dangers of nightclubs and other potentially oppositional adolescent spaces, as well as the models used to present the threat (those of a 'cult' that has a distinct 'mission'), are common to conspiracy rhetoric beyond the borders of apartheid.

The notion of Satanism as a conspiracy directed by evil forces was further shored up by a phobic response to foreign cultural products that had a long history in apartheid South Africa. The National Party regime had, for example, refused to allow television within its borders until the extremely late date of 1976, as it was imagined to be a corrupting influence beaming amoral, overly sophisticated images directly into the sanctity of the traditional home (Nixon 1994: 43–76). Stories about Satanism continually referenced the risk posed to young people by films and music from the West, which opened them up to demonic influence and possession. Satan-hunters such as Jonker (*Eastern Province Herald*, August 7, 1989) and the pamphlet-writing preacher James van Zyl (1988) cited cases of young people being drawn into Satanism after watching the US films *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*. Others blamed "exponents of Satanistic music … riddled with Eastern mysticism," specifically foreign rock groups such as Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, Queen, and KISS (*Argus,* October 17, 1986), for luring the youth away from the righteous path. A report on youth culture from the President's Council claimed that certain types of popular music imported from the West used "elements of Satanism" (*Cape Times*, June 19, 1987).

Thus, while not necessary explicitly spoken of in those terms, Satanism was imagined to be a conspiracy because it was described as an organised cult group with anti-social aims that was responsible for social ills; it had members in the higher echelons of society and made an effort to enlist and corrupt young people from influential backgrounds; it had a specific recruitment strategy; and it was marketed by foreign popular cultural products that were intentionally disseminated in order to foment unrest.

The Satanic panic also drew some of its affect from a longstanding conspiracy paranoia that had had an enormous influence on the imaginary landscape of late apartheid South Africa. The National Party made excellent use of Cold War rhetoric. Since the 1940s it had collated the "black peril" with the fear of the communist "red menace" in its propaganda (Giliomee 2003: 499). For Afrikaners "the Communist disregard for racial differences was a thrust at

the very heart of their ethnic existence" (Moodie 1975: 251), while communism's 'godless' stance against religion imperilled the moral heart of the nation. Communism in South Africa was depicted as a creeping menace managed by agents provocateurs who worked by luring in black people who didn't know better. Indeed, white South Africans were often warned to be vigilant as even the black people who worked in their homes could be secret communists. According to one paradigmatic lecture, delivered to school children in the 1970s,

> The so-called freedom fighters on our borders are not fighting for freedom, but for communism … In Soweto there are hundreds of terrorists. You must be aware of them—speak to your servant, she will tell you. If you notice something strange about her don't be afraid to tell the police. We must make use of our superior knowledge to outwit the communists … We must be spiritually prepared. We must be like David against the Philistine Goliath, and South Africa will triumph against the Red Onslaught.
>
> Quoted in GRAAF *et al.* 1988: 3

As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Falkof 2015: 77–81), Satanism and communism had many similarities in the white imagination. Both were against both God and the family; both aimed to undermine the state and society; both came from outside South Africa and were managed by cunning foreigners; both used popular culture to corrupt the youth. Indeed, they were sometimes equated by moral entrepreneurs: in 1990 the Minister for Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok, told a youth group that Satanism, a "crime against humankind," and Communism, an ideology that stands "totally opposed to religion and the church," were the major pitfalls facing the nation's young people (*Natal Mercury*, July 2, 1990).

The Satanism scare was layered on top of, and drew much of its iconography from, ongoing fears about communism. These ethnosociologies allowed whites to ascribe political unrest to foreign agitators, rather than acknowledging that black South Africans had the desire or the agency to aggressively resist apartheid. Similarly, fears of Satanism allowed whites to imagine that the 'real' threat did not come from the vast oppressed majority but from a conspiracy of white people, who operated within a recognisable frame of Christianity versus the devil. The conspiratorial nature of the Satanism scare allowed it to serve as a mechanism of collective disavowal for the potent and disconcerting social change that could be felt on the wind during the last years of apartheid.

8 Conclusion

Like concurrent episodes elsewhere in the world, white South Africa's Satanism scare can seem, in retrospect, both overblown and somewhat ridiculous. For a period of around a decade, and without any real proof, newspapers reported on sensational events such as "sadistic, drug-crazed human and animal sacrifices … chilling midnight sex orgies in graveyards … bizarre drug and sex rituals … a runaway teenager's throat was slit and her blood drunk by devil-worshippers" (*Sunday Tribune*, October 2, 1988), while police gave press conferences announcing that Satanists had killed eleven babies "specially bred for sacrifice to the devil and ritually murdered by having their throats slit and their hearts cut out and eaten" (*Cape Times*, May 19, 1990). Despite a few state attempts to rein in this extraordinary discourse, Satanism remained on front pages, uncritically repeated by journalists, police, teachers, parents and politicians.

But as I have shown, fears of Satanism were more than just an instance of collective hysteria. Rather, the religious and conspiratorial aspects of the Satanism scare performed an important role in the psychic landscape of late apartheid South Africa. They allowed some white people to disavow their fears of a future that would be defined by majority rule, investing their anxieties into imaginary white Satanists instead of the black South Africans who seemed to pose such a significant problem to the continuation of white comfort and white rule, in yet another act of racist othering that was determined to overlook legitimate African demands for political justice. Other whites experienced Satanism as an ethnosociological method of explaining the changes that seemed to be happening around them: the unspoken anxieties that characterised the late apartheid moment, and the constant shifts in power, stability and political mythology, could be explained away as a consequence of the work of evil Satanic plots, against which the individual was helpless but faith was invaluable.

Satanism in South Africa was more than just a cultural oddity. Uncovering these traces of an occult epidemic largely ignored by scholars reveals the larger communal effects of moral panic and conspiracy theory; and, importantly, the ways in which they can be used as methods of both negotiating and negating disconcerting social and political change. This analysis is not confined to the South African case, but can be used to decipher what roles conspiracy theories play globally in the collective life of groups that consider themselves under threat. In particular, the arguments made here could be fruitfully extended to the shared mythologies of a paranoid, reactive whiteness imagined to be under threat in a changing global arena.

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CHAPTER 7

"Trust Me, You Can't Trust Them": Stigmatised Knowledge in Cults and Conspiracies

Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Suzanne Newcombe

1 Introduction

Conspiracy theories are generally subject to ridicule, considered to be without basis or fact and un-scientific. When people are asked about conspiracy theories they will often mention the illusive Illuminati, lizard people, and Roswell (respectively, referring to an alleged group of secret rulers of the world, David Icke's theory that reptilians in human form are running the world, and an alleged UFO landing in Roswell, New Mexico, assumed to be covered up by American authorities). As Barkun (2003) astutely observed, conspiracy beliefs involve "stigmatised knowledge" that lurks in the margins of society. Dominant understanding and usage of the concept of conspiracy theory posits such knowledge as both irrational and as having an anti-establishment (or anti-hegemonic) position.

In a similar way, 'cult' in popular culture is a label used to stigmatise a minority religion; it is essentially a religion that the user of the term does not like. Upon hearing the word 'cult' many people think of a closed group with an authoritarian leader, such as Peoples Temple (and the tragedy at Jonestown in 1978 where over 900 people died) or the Branch Davidians (many of whom died in the fire at Waco, after a stand-off between the Branch Davidians and US federal and state agents in 1993). Although the word cult can also be a technical term and encompass a variety of more specific meanings, it shares with the term 'conspiracy theory' a position of marginality in popular parlance.

Conspiracy theories are most often associated with those who *believe* that rationally planned and executed evil plots are being perpetrated against them; the label 'conspiracy theory' is often used to stigmatise both the beliefs and those who believe them. Barkun argues that conspiracy theorists understand the universe to be governed by design rather than by randomness; nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. The conspiracist's world is meaningful, it delineates and explains evil (Barkun 2003: 3). We use the term conspiracy belief/s as well as conspiracy theory/ies, acknowledging that they both commonly involve beliefs delineating

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metaphysical elements (or design) rather than simply empirical positions. Conspiracy beliefs, and believers, are generally not evaluated in popular discourse solely according to the rules of philosophical and empirical analysis, that is, on the evidence base of the theory they propose. Rather, those ascribing to conspiracy beliefs are often judged on the marginality or even rarity of their beliefs. Thus, belief becomes an important aspect of a conspiracy theory for both those supporting a particular conspiracy theory and those opposing such a theory.

There is great diversity of beliefs and practices within socially marginal groups, religious or otherwise. But it is also worth considering characteristics that many socially marginal groups have in common. Here, it can be useful to return to Colin Campbell's concept of a 'cultic milieu' (1972). The cultic milieu is a permanent feature of society, which is oppositional by nature—the one thing that those in the cultic milieu have in common is rejection of the status quo and selective dominant paradigms. Sometimes there are good reasons for opposing the status quo and dominant paradigms, and many religious traditions have a long history of providing compelling narratives for doing exactly that.

The oppositional nature of the cultic milieu encourages groups and networks to take a sectarian stance, creating social and conceptual boundaries between 'us' and 'them'—those on the outside. Ideological or religious narratives often create a hierarchy in this division, where 'us' is good, right, or even spiritually or supernaturally superior, and 'them' is negative, wrong, bad, or even evil. Minority groups or networks within the cultic milieu are knowingly marginal, and narratives of dark conspiracies against them are appealing. This chapter will explore the sociology of conspiracy theory in areas of the contemporary cultic milieu, identifying rational social reasons for allegiance to a particular theory as often being more compelling for individuals than the apparent empirical truth or falsity of the theory itself.

Before discussing some specific case studies, it would be wise to consider the idea of conspiracy theories in a bit more detail. By definition, a conspiracy belief should mean nothing more than a theory of a conspiracy, a secret plan by a group to do something. There are many examples of real conspiracies, including the plot to assassinate Caesar, the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the Watergate affair,[1] government surveillance, documented corporate cover-ups (such as the dangers of asbestos, tobacco), and

1 Although according to Steve Clarke this is still only an "official explanation" that has been widely accepted (2007: 168).

the cover-up of child sexual abuse by the Roman Catholic Church. For several minority religious groups, such as the Weaver family at Ruby Ridge in 1992 and the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas, in 1993, fear of US-government persecution led to spirals of deviance amplification, which ended in the violent fulfilment of conspiracy beliefs. Fringe communities may have legitimate views on particular issues. Logically, Pigden argues, since history is full of conspiracy theories that have since been established as fact, every "historically and politically literate person is a big-time conspiracy theorist" (2007: 222).

But at the same time, conspiracy beliefs are closely tied with notions of marginality and stigma. Stigmatised knowledge is, as it says, stigmatising; such narratives are generally rejected by 'them', the majority who are likely to reject anti-hegemonic narratives as conspiracy theory. Thus 'conspiracy theorist' is a stigmatising label that functions to defame and denounce someone as 'other' and less rational (hence less worthy)—even ridiculous, while affirming the collective of the majority. Neil Levy argues that being in conflict with accounts put forward by the relevant epistemic authorities is an essential aspect of conspiracy theories, and he takes the hard-line position that it is almost never rational to accept such theories (2007: 181).

Sometimes social groups work hard to enforce the norms and boundaries of what define the community and its concerns. For example, Kai Erikson's research on early Puritan settlements in the USA analysed apparent 'crime waves' in these communities (1966). Erikson found that the Puritans essentially acted against trivial deviances from their norms (rather than real threats), in order to define who they were and what their mission was. The moral boundaries of the Puritan settlements had been under threat for a number of reasons, and the identification and punishment of deviants (from the norms) reaffirmed the Puritans' collective conscience at the time. In this example, whether or not the Puritans focused on deviance or crime was largely determined by the need of the community to define its collective conscience. Similarly, the definition of conspiracy theory as marginal to the mainstream is a way for our culture to enforce the majority understandings.

But boundary maintenance involves work from both sides. Those who hold non-mainstream theories often work actively to reinforce these beliefs with bonds of social identity. And the scientific community, for example, is not necessarily considered trustworthy by everybody: it might be accused of flawed thinking, institutional bias, or even considered to be part of the conspiracy. While Levy's conclusion (2007) is that it is almost never rational to accept conspiracy theories, this idea needs further discussion. By emphasising the social positioning of conspiracy theories, we can open up an interesting avenue to explore the importance of social construction of meaning.

2 Our Socialised Knowledge

As Karl Popper stated: "our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite" (2002 [1963]: 38). In the case of knowledge, increasing specialisation has, in some way, further increased our ignorance. Jargon keeps many amateurs at bay while reduced access to specialist materials (such as journals behind paywalls) makes some knowledge a matter of privilege. Expertise makes us singularly knowledgeable in certain fields, yet ignorant in other matters; hence we must rely on other experts on a daily basis. Experts can be contested, because knowledge is complicated, and often disputed, especially in a diverse society (Collins and Evans 2007). There are different types of marginal knowledge, from forgotten knowledge (the stuff our ancestors and grandparents knew, but we have forgotten), ignored and rejected knowledge (not deemed helpful for us, yet often picked up by others), dangerous knowledge (sensitive or considered too powerful for some to know, like esoteric knowledge), to stigmatised knowledge. Barkun elaborates on the idea of stigmatised knowledge as:

> claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the fact of the marginalisation of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error—universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like.
>
> BARKUN 2003: 26

A sociology of knowledge, then, also involves by implication a sociology of ignorance, termed 'agnotology' (from the Greek *agnōsis*, 'not-knowing') by Proctor and Schiebinger (2008). The latter raises interesting questions of who is ignorant, why, and in what ways. Ignorance could have a variety of causes, and we are all ignorant in some way (as mentioned above). In some cases, of course, 'being left in the dark' could be the result of purposeful and strategic design to protect dangerous or sensitive knowledge (such as restricting access to nuclear sites) or even an orchestrated conspiracy. A well-evidenced example of a deliberate, orchestrated conspiracy of ignorance is the mis- and disinformation campaigns coordinated by the tobacco industry over decades to produce doubt, hence ignorance, over the effects of smoking in causing cancer (Proctor 2008).

The point here is clearly not whether someone is right or wrong, but that ignorance, like knowledge, is socially constructed and negotiated, and since we don't always share cognitive orientations, we end up judging ignorance from our own cognitive orientations (Smithson 1985). As in the case of mis- and

dis-information about links between tobacco and cancer, the empirical truth may only be clear historically, when the mainstream social discourse has shifted significantly, and post-hoc facts and/or narratives have allowed for an accepted 'truth'. "Thus, well-socialised Western adults generally avoid what is socially understood as 'superstition', 'subversive political beliefs', and other illegitimate thought-ways, insofar as these are discredited interpretive frameworks" (Smithson 1985: 152). Yet, for other groups, these may be very valid interpretive frameworks.

For specific groups, ascribed ignorance can come from relying on other epistemic authorities, or relying on other paradigms altogether. An example here would be that of self-knowledge, where people choose to rely on their intuition and gut feeling rather than rational knowledge. A good example of this is that of applied kinesiology, which makes an empirical science of testing muscle resistance to uncover deeper access to intuitive 'truths' held in the body, particularly in identifying what lifestyle changes are needed to bring an individual into better health.[2] This emphasis on self-knowledge is often seen by enthusiasts as a necessary corrective in our society of experts, and has filtered from the fringe New Age into more mainstream ideas (Heelas 1996).

Coady (2007) and Levy (2007) argue that we are both utterly reliant on experts, and suffer from the "illusion of explanatory depth" (that is, we are ignorant of our own ignorance; see Rozenbilt and Keil 2002). Hence, we may not be able to determine which experts are 'right', with authorities being chosen not necessarily according to their epistemological skills, but according to credibility. Coady argues that people are more likely to believe official stories, those propagated by institutions that have the power to influence what is believed at a particular time and place, hence, political or epistemic authorities (2007: 200). Levy, too, states that responsible believers ought to accept explanations offered by properly constituted epistemic authorities (properly constituted means they are embedded in our social worlds) (2007: 185). However, according to Levy, due to our illusion of explanatory depth, there is a strong temptation for some groups to disbelieve the official stories in favour of other epistemic authorities (2007: 186). Examples of social networks where alternative epistemic authorities become a focus for particular communities will be the focus of the two extended case studies of this chapter.

This discussion of knowledge, ignorance and relative social power brings a new dimension to the concept of conspiracy theory, and allows for a more nuanced and sociological understanding of the role of conspiracy thinking in contemporary society, and how it is viewed, as it involves social meanings and

2 http://www.icak.co.uk/default.asp. Accessed 13/1/2016.

structures. There are credible conspiracy beliefs, and less credible ones, but credibility is subjective. Furthermore, such beliefs are social. Different conspiracy beliefs have adherents with specific demographics. Why is this so, and how does this happen?

3 Cultures of Conspiracy

In the USA, conspiracy theories correlate with political affiliation, with each side showing preference for specific favourite theories (Public Policy Polling 2013). Some conspiracies were more favoured among Democrats (for instance that Bush intentionally misled on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction), whereas others (for instance that global warming is a hoax) were more favoured among Republicans (Public Policy Polling 2013). These demographic correlations with particular theories in America are echoed with racial identification. Ted Goertzel found that African-American respondents were more likely than white or Hispanic respondents to believe in the conspiracies that specifically affected their community; American blacks were more likely than other groups to believe the FBI killed Martin Luther King, the CIA put drugs in their community, and that AIDS was created to wipe out the American black community. Specifically, many African-Americans saw a parallel between AIDS and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study conducted from 1952 to 1972, with a knowledge of this historical test predisposing African-Americans to suspect AIDS might have emerged in similar circumstances (Goertzel 1994: 740). Alex Jones (Texas-based host of InfoWars.com/PrisonPlanet.TV) argues that the USA is singling out and profiling white Americans as terrorists (for example, see article and comments after Kabbany 2016),[3] while many other voices argue instead that blacks and Muslims in the USA are more likely to be singled out (for example, Welsh 2006). Similarly, Muslims across the globe are more likely than those of other religions or no religion to believe that 9/11 was perpetrated by forces other than Bin Laden (Pew Global 2011).

Specific beliefs pervade throughout different and often definite enclaves of the cultic milieu. Millennial beliefs, especially those regarding the imminent return of Jesus Christ, often focus on specific teachings around the expected

3 Jones' views on race are as multi-faceted as they are controversial. In May 2015, for example, Jones and www.infowars.com organised a rally in front of a Planned Parenthood in Austin, Texas, accusing Planned Parenthood of continuing the policy outlined in its founder Margaret Sanger's "admitted targeting of the black community and all innocent children" with a policy of "genocide of black lives by abortion" (Infowars.com, 2015).

occurrences leading up to this event, including Satan/the Antichrist controlling parts of the government, the seven-headed beast as the New World Order, and predictions that humans will be enslaved. A spectrum of these beliefs can be found in some Christian sectarian groups as well as parts of more ordinary Evangelical or Pentecostal churches. In some groups, current events are actively interpreted to find signs of the end times, although the extent to which this speculation is a central focus varies among congregations (Thompson 2005). Yet, such beliefs, or aspects of them, can also be found among some communities that on the surface appear to be more political than religious. The idea that humans will eventually be enslaved by the system and microchipped (or receive a barcode tattoo) can be shared by Christian, political, and environmental groups, for example. Similarly, beliefs that big pharma is creating diseases (such as ADHD, certain mental illnesses) for profit, so that they can then sell the medication that supposedly provides the cure, can also be found among a variety of milieus, from the religious and political to the spiritual, including parts of the medical establishment (see Goldacre 2013; Singler 2015, 2016). Some of these ideas are entering what many would consider mainstream circles.

According to Ted Goertzel (1994), minority status and 'anomia' are the strongest determinants of belief in conspiracies, with minority status also being strongly correlated with 'anomia' and with lower levels of interpersonal trust.[4] He measured 'anomia' on a scale of items designed to tap into feelings of discontent with the established institutions of contemporary society (measuring the belief that the situation of the average person is getting worse, that it is not fair to bring a child into today's world, and that most public officials are not interested in the average man) (1994: 736). Hence, Goertzel associated belief in conspiracies with the feelings of alienation and disaffection from the system. Two decades later, this hypothesis persists, with an interdisciplinary research centre at Cambridge University focusing on the research question: "What does the prevalence of conspiracy theories tell us about trust in democratic societies?" (CRASSH 2013). Indeed, what does the prevalence of conspiracy theories tell us about diversity, subcultures, their experts, and official accounts?

An interesting example here is hip-hop culture. Travis L. Gosa (2011) has written about hip-hop culture, where the dominant narrative is 'counterknowledge', a subversive racial reframing of social problems.[5] Here "white-controlled

4 Goertzel uses the term 'anomia' rather than anomie. We shall use his term, as he uses it, but put it in quotation marks.

5 See also Partridge in this volume for more on conspiracy theories and popular music.

spaces" and passive acceptance of dominant narratives are derided, while ideas of intrinsic and ancient wisdom are glorified, along with a strong anti-authority narrative. According to Gosa:

> Key to hip hop culture is the de-privileging of expert knowledge gained through participation in white controlled spaces such as schools, and the problematization of passive acceptance of dominant narratives. The truth and valuable skills, in the world of hip hop, can also be attained through lived-experience and—feeling it. (2011: 5–6)

Gosa argues that the function of the use of conspiracy theories, or counter-knowledge, in hip-hop is to provide entertainment, while also integrating identity politics and challenging dominant knowledge. Hence it is entertainment, yet also political (Gosa 2011). As Public Enemy's Chuck D has famously said, "Rap is the black man's CNN" (Thorpe 1999).

The message in hip-hop music is meant to address problems facing the black community, problems that are often ignored by the mainstream media. In doing so, hip-hop provides an alternative discourse, critical of the establishment and the status quo. See, for example, the song 'Obama Nation Part 2' by British hip-hop artist Lowkey (which also features the US artist M1 and British artist Black The Ripper) about US President Barack Obama:

> Articulate and handsome, Afghanistan held for ransom
> By the hand of this black man, neo-colonial puppet
> White power with a black face, he said fuck it I'll do it
> A master of disguise, expert at telling lies
> Then they gave him a Nobel Peace Price
> Should of known he was trained in Chicago
> Word to Chairmen Fred and Mark Clark
> What they do in the dark will come out in the light
> Like a wikileaks site
>
> LOWKEY 2011

Lowkey vocalises the thoughts of a subculture that finds itself in opposition to the mainstream political powers, reinforcing its scepticism about the gap between rhetorical ideals and the foreign policy reality of the United States in authorising unmanned predator drone strikes on many countries in Africa and the Middle East. Despite great hope that the election of the first black US President might change the US and global political situation, this community was greatly disappointed that the status quo largely remained.

More historically, a particular influential force in early hip-hop culture in the USA has been the Five Percent Nation (also known as the Nation of God and Earths, founded by Clarence 13X Smith after he left the Nation of Islam). The Five Percent Nation (or Five Percenters), derives its name from the belief that only five per cent of the population is righteous. Five Percenters tend to follow non-traditional variants of Islam, non-standard historical accounts, and 'Supreme Mathematics' (numerology tools supposedly for unlocking the keys to reality and the universe). They teach that black people are the original people of Earth who founded all civilisation, and that in fact the 'blackman' is God. They also consider that white people have deceived society into honouring and worshipping false gods and idols. Some Five Percenters profess their views through rap and hip-hop music, and they have been influential in the genre—artists include members of the Wu-Tang Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, and many more. Some have moved on from the Five Percent Nation, and others claim that although they were influenced by the ideas, they were never formally associated with the group. Nonetheless, the Five Percenters, and their particular use of language, are often considered a major influence on the early days of hip-hop (for example, see Knight 2008 and Allah 2010).

Five Percenters generally do not consider their beliefs a religion, despite their goals of the achievement of national consciousness (consciousness of man's divine origin, black people as the first nation to exist) and peace (achieved through Supreme Mathematics). Another goal is community control, control of the educational, economic, political, media, and health institutions of their community. A clear overarching desire communicated by these goals is the subversion of the current (white) authorities and the independence and self-reliance of the black community. This can be done through knowledge of the self, by getting in touch with one's inner god. Another important source of reliable information is the intellectual community on the street surrounding the alternative book dealers (Gosa 2011: 12–14), which provides a subculture of alternative knowledge. Then, hip-hop artists themselves spread (or 'drop') this knowledge through their music, and in some cases through their own books. The hip-hop subculture has its own knowledge, and key figures become the epistemic authorities endowed with credibility, providing the official stories.

Credibility becomes an important issue, as accepting knowledge can become about who you trust and identify with rather than about facts.[6]

6 In another interesting example, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, in *The Power of Unreason* (2010), wrote that conspiracy beliefs need to be countered by government and critical thinking skills taught in schools. This backfired below the line, and the paper was followed by a lengthy online discussion questioning their institution (Demos, a British cross-party think tank),

As discussed above, the hip-hop subculture favours self-reliance (inner god) and the credibility of the local street intellectuals and hip-hop artists over the official accounts of white institutions. Gosa also explored how hip-hop culture fits with Campbell's concept of the cultic milieu (1972), where ideas are shared and strange coalitions may form. He cites the alliance of Alex Jones and black rappers working together to discuss theories about the New World Order and 9/11, illustrating how the cultic milieu creates unlikely allies in oppositional efforts (Gosa 2011: 9). In another example, on the basis of their separatist politics and belief in real racial distinctions, white supremacists and the Black Nation of Islam have joined forces to denounce the government (Gardell 2002).

4 The Bilderberg Fringe Festival as Cultic Milieu

To recap, Campbell described the cultic milieu as a fertile ground inhabited by a "society of seekers" who share a "basic principle of tolerance and eclecticism" (1972: 127), and who oppose the dominant societal culture and embrace a variety of deviant and heterodox approaches to life. The realm of stigmatised knowledge, according to Barkun (2003), represents the broader intellectual universe into which both rejected knowledge and the cultic milieu may be fitted. Its marginal status is evidence of its truth; which is supported by narratives that authoritative institutions cannot be trusted, they are creating the fictions we live by, they are the tools of the malevolent forces, etcetera. Under the auspices of counter-hegemonic movement, multiple oppositional subcultures mix, mingle, and influence one another in the cultic milieu. The milieu is differentiated, and consists of many enclaves, not all of which share all their beliefs, and some of which may even have wildly opposing beliefs. But some ideas are shared. We elaborate on these ideas by illustrating the significance of reinforcing shared social bonds within the context of conspiracy theories.

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alleging it is part of a conspiracy itself (Boyle 2010). Allegations included that Demos, and the authors, were "pushing propaganda on children," part of the Illuminati, with the authors being at best naïve or at worst disinformation specialists or government agents (see the discussion at the Above Top Secret (ATS) Forum 2010). Similarly, just previous to this, the paper "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures" (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009) caused outrage online after the authors argued government could "cognitively infiltrate" spaces where "false conspiracy theories" circulated. The irony of the suggestion to defeat conspiracy theories through the use of what essentially amounts to a conspiracy was not lost on commenters. It did not help that Cass became the Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Obama administration soon after publication of the article.

A good example of these ideas is the Bilderberg Fringe Festival, organised in Watford, UK, to coincide with the Bilderberg meeting of 2013 taking place nearby. The Bilderberg meeting is an annual private conference of approximately 120–150 political leaders and experts from industry, finance, academia, and the media (Bilderberg Meetings 2016). Or, this is the official account; other accounts commonly describe the group as the world elite (or The Secret Rulers of the World) working together to create a new world order (Estulin 2005).[7] Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist attended the Fringe Festival in June 2013 and the following discussion is largely based on her observations and notes.

With approximately 2000 attendees in a field (organisers had agreed with police to only let in 1000), there were more people at the Bilderberg Fringe Festival than at the G8 protest in London in 2013 (even fewer were at the G8 protest in Northern Ireland). The author observed that many were turned away at the entrance due to overcrowding. Protesting the Bilderberg meeting is a relatively new development, as Bilderberg meetings in the past had been more secretive (the official website is still sparse), and information about them, including a list of participants, has only recently become more available (and accessing it slightly less stigmatising).[8] The particular location of the 2013 meeting made access to, and protesting in, a field near the event easier.

The attendees of the Bilderberg Fringe Festival took conspiracy beliefs seriously, but at the same time organisers were happy to self-consciously draw humorous attention to the popular marginality of conspiracy ideas. For example, a functional map of the area posted on the media tent highlighted the "plutocrat viewing zone" and identified the "speaker's corner" (a reference to the north-east corner of Hyde Park, historically reserved for public speaking and debates) as being on a small mound, referred to as the "grassy knoll" (a reference to a small hill in Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas, often referred to as a possible site of—some of—the gunshots that killed John F. Kennedy).[9]

The field held a range of attendees, with different areas offering posters (for example about the 'truth' of the Bilderberg group), information banners on special causes (for example, naming the parts of the British establishment that are implicated in the alleged cover-up of child sexual abuse[10]), and a healing

7 See also http://www.bilderberg.org/. Accessed 6/1/2016.

8 Charlie Skelton (2016) was the first to begin reporting on the Bilderberg group in a broadsheet newspaper, *The Guardian*, in 2009, under the series title "Our Man at Bilderberg"; this series has returned annually. Skelton is a comedian, and the articles are comedic in nature.

9 See Figure 7.2. The stick-figure with the sad face, labelled "Gus," was the security guard who struggled to keep the peace when the large crowd outside were told the event had reached its full capacity.

10 https://childabusejointhedots.wordpress.com/. Accessed 6/1/2016.

FIGURE 7.1 An informal poster at the Fringe Festival.
PHOTO BY VAN ECK DUYMAER VAN TWIST

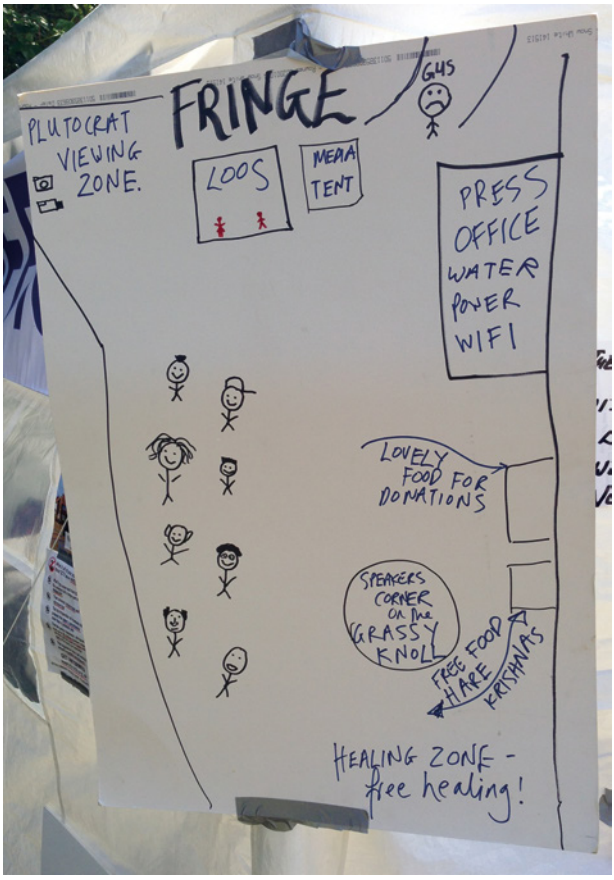

FIGURE 7.2 Informal map of Fringe Festival.
PHOTO BY VAN ECK DUYMAER VAN TWIST

zone where alternative medical techniques were offered. There was free food, donated by some individuals, as well as a Hare Krishna food cart (provided by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness). There were a handful of individuals holding *V for Vendetta* masks in their hands,[11] suggesting that they identified with Anonymous (see Coleman 2014), but were not attending Anonymously (that is, they were not wearing their masks). The speakers were varied as well, including some specific campaigns (for example, Justice for Hollie),[12]

11 The masks are from the film *V for Vendetta*, but represent Guy Fawkes, who (along with others) attempted to blow up the House of Lords on November 5, 1605, in an attempt to assassinate King James I. In *V for Vendetta* the mask is used by an anarchist revolutionary who aims to bring down the government and convince people to rule themselves.

12 "Hollie Grieg: An Abuse Victim of the Corrupt Scottish Establishment." At http://hollie-greig.info/. Accessed 6/1/2016.

performances (poets, comedians), the late Labour MP Michael Meacher, and the crowd-drawing conspiracy theory celebrities Alex Jones and David Icke.

Michael Meacher pleased the crowds by stating his outrage with the Bilderberg meeting, where the "real leaders of Western finance capitalism were meeting without publishing an agenda or reports of proceedings." He argued that some politicians were attending in an official capacity, yet there would be no report to Parliament, and concluded that this meeting amounted to the "biggest lobbyist group in Western capitalism, allowed to meet in total secrecy" (2013). With this political analysis, Meacher had the crowd cheering. Icke also proved a popular speaker; he focused on Google's presence at the Bilderberg meeting, and postulated that Google will develop the technology that will eventually turn people into robots, at the mercy of programmers (Icke 2013). Alex Jones followed with a passionate populist speech about the leaders of the world designing pesticides to spread cancer and other diseases to kill parts of the population in an exercise of eugenics (Jones 2013).

These three speakers in particular formed an interesting illustration of the cultic milieu, with its varied cultures and enclaves. Meacher appeared to present an argument which the crowd generally were on board with; he managed to find an issue that was uncontroversial enough in these circles, and unified the disparate crowd. Icke also engaged well with the varied crowd, yet it is interesting to note here that he did not speak about some of the topics that make him more controversial (or even derided), and might have been more divisive; there was no mention of reptilians, for example. Jones ventured into more controversial topics, and the crowd became more divided. There were clearly people at the front who knew of him and seemed on board with what he was saying, perhaps avid viewers of his shows. Yet, in the middle and back of the field people were chatting, and it also appeared to be the optimal moment to get in the toilet queues. It was clear that Meacher and Icke were aware of what issues would carry across cultures of this milieu, whereas Jones either did not, or chose to stick to his message, and alienate some of the crowd.[13]

The Bilderberg Fringe event was therefore a good illustration of the cultic milieu, with space allowed for a variety of points of view and styles of presentation, ranging from the deeply spiritual and religious to the political and, for some, 'out there' conspiracy theory. This large and varied crowd came together to protest the secrecy of the Bilderberg meeting, and could be further unified by some speakers, and on some matters, but on other occasions there was a clear tapestry of difference where some listened to a speaker while others

13 This might also have been due to the location, as Jones is less well known in the UK than in the US, and some of the details of issues he discussed may have more resonance with US audiences.

meditated, received healing, chatted with friends, or danced together in their own little group—as they might at a music festival. The only moment of tension that day occurred at the entrance when large groups of people could no longer enter the field: this was handled by the smooth joint efforts of Gus, some local police assigned to this event, and event organisers, who were involved in a voluntary capacity (and one of whom argued that such problems can always be resolved with love). Other than that, the ambiance of the day was jovial and generous, people were mingling and chatting, and volunteers distributed free food and drinks. Again, not unlike a music festival on a sunny day.

5 Closed Sources of Information: The Case of Shugden

While the participants at the Bilderberg Fringe Festival might be best characterised by loose association to a cultic milieu, the protesters against the Dalai Lama, who in 2014–2015 organised under the organisation of the International Shugden Community (ISC), have very specific allegiances relating to a non-embodied figure called Shugden.[14] Both the proponents and the antagonists in this conflict have strong personal experiences upon which to draw. Shugden practices can be understood as a cult in the traditional sense of a cult in the Catholic Church; Shugden is one of a number of non-embodied personalities that a Tibetan Buddhist might ask for assistance. However, the status and nature of Shugden is very much contested. The strength and intensity of the protest rests partially on 'facts' that are disputed by each side of the debate. The facts used by each side produce mutually exclusive, conflicting narratives. Each side reinforces its narrative by encouraging sympathisers to rely on information provided by select "epistemic authorities" (Baurmann 2008), or 'authorised sources' and to discount any evidence or testimony produced from the other side. Through enquiry-led work at Inform, Suzanne Newcombe has been following the activities of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), its dynamics with former members, the rhetorical debates around Shugden, and protests by pro-Shugden demonstrators against the Dalai Lama since 2008. During the revival of active protests against the Dalai Lama in 2014–2015, Newcombe monitored the conflict closely, researching English-language sources of information about the conflict and its history, and attending several events within this milieu.

Allegiance to a particular side of this controversy is very much about the question "Who (or which sources) do you trust?" One participant at a public debate on Shugden in London exclaimed: "We have our sources. You have your sources.

14 Another organisation, the Western Shugden Society (WSS) served as the umbrella organisation organising protests against the Dalai Lama between 1996 and 2008.

Why not just let us believe and practice what we want?" (Rabten 2014: 1:29.50–1:30). This opinion was also echoed on Facebook discussions and as commentary on media articles (for example, Nyema 2014). Both sides of this controversy could be described as encouraging an epistemic seclusion, where the opinions of respected lineage teachers and personal experience are given more weight than a systematic examination of evidence from all possible sources.

Opinions on the nature of Shugden could not be more diametrically opposed. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), have described Shugden as an evil spirit, preferring to use the title of Dolgyal to identify the spirit (Lopez 1998). The name of Dolgyal emphasises narratives of Shugden's origin as a spirit identified while residing in the Dol area of (now) Chinese-controlled Tibet in around 1657 (Dreyfus 1998; Office of Tibet 1999; Bultrini 2013; The Dolgyal Shugden Research Society 2014). Historically, Shugden has been more often channelled by oracles for advice, rather than being understood by practitioners as a fully realised Buddha (Dreyfus 1998; Mills 2009).

The majority of Buddhists involved in the contemporary protest movement are associated with the UK-headquartered New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), a religious movement founded by Kelsang Gyatso in 1992. One sympathetic blogger made a conservative estimate that at least 70 per cent of the ISC protesters were NKT members (Indy Hack 2015a). Through this association with the NKT, the majority of ISC protestors would hold the view that Shugden is a fully enlightened emanation of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (Gyatso 1997). In the Tibetan pantheon, Mañjuśrī is understood as a fully enlightened embodiment of wisdom (*prajñā*) who will always act for the benefit of all sentient beings.

From the side of those who see Shugden as an evil spirit, the view promoted by the Dalai Lama, there are narratives of Shugden stealing power and energy from those who propagate him. For example, Lama Zopa details how "those who strongly practice Dolgyal eventually end up dying in the most dangerous manner" (Zopa 2012: 2). Additionally, many Tibetan Buddhists, who view Shugden as malevolent, avoid using the name as a way of avoiding the negative attention of the spirit (Chandler 2009: 199; Rigumi 2010).

The doctrinal differences became entrenched in 1996 when the Dalai Lama issued a series of public statements advising those who support him to abandon their practice of Shugden. There is an extended section on the CTA website detailing the Dalai Lama's reasons for advising against the practice (Tibetnet.com 2015). While supporters of the Dalai Lama have admitted some discrimination may exist amongst the exile community, they deny an outright "ban" and insist that what has occurred is largely self-segregation (Shugdeninfo.com 2014; Barnett 2015).

Those who continue their Shugden practices insist the Dalai Lama has in fact issued a ban against the practice. Moreover, they claim that those in the Tibetan exile community who have continued a Shugden practice—as well as those who have been wrongly accused of having a Shugden practice—have been discriminated against, harassed, bullied, denied medical care, been made homeless, been refused sale of vegetables, have had their businesses boycotted, and claim that one young man had fingers cut off by supporters of the Dalai Lama (International Shugden Community 2014a).

The status of Shugden in the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist community as a whole is complex. Any history of Shugden practice is inherently contested, as are the theological issues (see Dreyfus 2011). For a sincere practitioner, especially a Western one with limited knowledge of Tibetan language and culture, how do you know what to think?

Here, the most pertinent question for the actors in this conflict is "Who do you trust?", with trust often being put in the local teacher and community. The pro-Shugden groups relate to specific networks of Lamas, particularly associated with the leadership of Kundeling Rinpoche (Lobsang Yeshi, b. 1959), Ganchen Lama (b. 1941), and Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (b. 1931). For the case of those participating in the protest movement, personal bonds of loyalty to spiritual teachers are reinforced by the communal experience of protest. The anti-Shugden groups actively affirm loyalty to the Dalai Lama and the ideal of Tibetan cultural unity.

The Shugden conflict is often framed by those invested in conflict in survivalist terms. The supporters of the Dalai Lama believe that they are the best hope for preserving authentic Tibetan culture that is threatened by Chinese occupation within Tibet (Thurman 2014). But there is an alternative theory circulating amongst Shugden practitioners that the Dalai Lama's attempt to negotiate limited Tibetan autonomy within Chinese-controlled Tibet (the controversial "Middle Way" policy) will dilute Tibetan Buddhism into a hybrid and inauthentic pan-Chinese form of Buddhism. The theory here is that the Dalai Lama, by working with Chinese authorities, will destroy the authentic Buddhist traditions of Tibet.[15]

This position can be nicely summed up in the photograph of the protests that took place on June 28, 2015 in Aldershot, UK, attended by Suzanne Newcombe (Figure 7.3). In the morning, on one side of the street were the members of the International Shugden Community (ISC), largely ethnically white, many with shaved heads and wearing robes that mark them as Western-born ordained Buddhists. On the other side, directly in front of Aldershot's Buddhist

15 This theory was advanced by two of the enquirers to Inform in 2015.

FIGURE 7.3 ISC and Tibetan protestors in front of the football stadium in Aldershot, UK on June 29, 2015.
PHOTO BY SUZANNE NEWCOMBE

Community Centre and the football stadium (the venue for the Dalai Lama's public teaching that day), were ethnic Tibetans dressed in traditional cultural clothes. They were banging Tibetan drums and doing traditional dancing, perhaps in a hope of overpowering the shouts of "Dalai Lama, Stop Lying" from the other side of the road.

On the far side of the street, the vertically striped "Buddhist Flags" are being waved by many of the protesters. The author spoke to one ISC representative distributing leaflets, who described these as specifically "Gelug" flags, representing the undiluted purity of their lineage of Buddhist teachings. However, identical flags were also visible at the Tibetan Cultural Centre on the opposite side of the street, which was hosting the Dalai Lama. For the ISC protesters, the very possibility of enlightenment was seen as being threatened by the politics of the Dalai Lama. On the near side, where the photo was taken, Tibetan national flags are visible; for the Tibetans, their culture and heritage is at stake with Chinese occupation, and the Dalai Lama is seen as a symbol of cultural continuity and a focus of communal unity in the face of occupation. Both sides of the street meet their goals of manifesting internal community unity in the active rejection of the message of the opposite side of the street.

The experience of the protesters reinforces internal group connections, reinforcing group solidarity in the face of a visible, potentially dangerous 'other'. In autumn 2014, ISC protesters in the USA travelled on chartered busses following the Dalai Lama's public speaking engagements. The protesters shared accommodation and meals, and a Facebook trail of participants emphasised group solidarity, finding the experience largely inspiring and motivating (see, for example, Citron 2014a–g). The understanding of many Western protestors centre on pro-active and positive support for the human rights of their fellow Shugden practitioners in India, who they believe are being abused by the position of the Dalai Lama and the CTA (McBretney 2014). As evidence of intimidation by the Dalai Lama, Shugden practitioners draw attention to a page on the CTA website which 'names and shames' over thirty Tibetan nationals who have been active in protesting, in some cases giving an address of the pro-Shugden protesters (Tibetnet.com 2014). Some ISC activists prefer the anonymity in activism and Internet communication due to fears for their personal safety; both sides actively fear violence from the other.

Supporters of the Dalai Lama emphasise security breaches and the potential for assassinating the Dalai Lama, which supporters emphasise would be politically helpful for China. The potential for an individual to cause serious harm or death to the Dalai Lama is a serious risk for those charged with his security. A focus for those supporting the Dalai Lama is the dominant narrative around the murder of three Tibetans in exile in 1997, Lobsang Gyatso (1928–1997) and two of his students. Lobsang Gyatso had founded the School of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, was a close associate of the Dalai Lama, and was very vocal against Shugden practices. It was widely reported that the Indian police have been working on the assumption that these murders were committed by two Chinese citizens, associated with Shugden supporters based in New Delhi (Newsweek Staff 1997; Dalailama.com 2015; di Giovanni 1998; Macartney 2007). Shugden supporters point out that there has never been any trial to prove the guilt of the assumed assailants. The actual violence in this incident remains in the narrative of both sides as a reminder of potential lethal violence, with both sides expressing anxiety for possible assassination attempts from the other side (see also International Shugden Community 2013: 155–157).

In 2015, Tibetan TV and Voice of America screened interviews with Lama Tseta Rinpoche in which he stated that he has personal knowledge of direct and specific routes of sponsorship from the Communist Party of China for Shugden supporters as a means of undermining the Dalai Lama's authority, increasing their control over Tibet, and destroying Tibetan culture (Boston Tibetan Truthful Public Talk 2015: 18.30; Voice of America 2015). His hearsay evidence is understood as truth for most of the Tibetan community who sup-

port the Dalai Lama, proving a Chinese conspiracy inspiring the protests. On several occasions, followers of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso have breached security around the Dalai Lama to aggressively question the Dalai Lama about his stance on Shugden. With Lama Tseta's testimony, supporters of Shugden become, by definition, untrustworthy Chinese stooges to the supporters of the Dalai Lama, although this interview and a further Reuters article published in late December 2015 merely served as confirmation of what was already understood as an existing Chinese-driven conspiracy (Langue *et al.* 2015).

However, seen from the other side, individual protesters probably have little direct interest in Chinese-Tibetan politics, and indeed present the view that mixing religion and politics is an aberration of their Gelug Buddhist tradition. There is also evidence to suggest that individual Shugden practitioners within the exile community have experienced real prejudice and persecution (see, for example, Mooney 2011). But pro-Dalai Lama supporters sometimes make simplistic claims that Shugden practitioners are in the pay of the Chinese. Even if there is some truth to a pro-Shugden Chinese conspiracy (Langue *et al.* 2015), members of the NKT who join the ISC protests are primarily motivated by more local concerns and 'noble' motivations such as speaking out for the oppressed in the exile community and preserving their valuable dharma. Accusations that ISC members are stooges of the Chinese government reinforce beliefs that the Dalai Lama is a "liar" and "the worst dictator in this modern day" (International Shugden Community 2014b).

While there is ample information online in English from many different perspectives on the Shugden conflict, the pro-Shugden groups promote their own selective sources of online information and Twitter campaigns. When faced with a narrative challenge, ISC supporters have shown a pattern of engaging in *ad hominem* attacks against both the Dalai Lama and other individuals offering alternative sources of information. Images and literature have circulated within the pro-Shugden circles identifying the Dalai Lama as a spy, as Donald Trump, as the "worst dictator in the modern world," or a Muslim,[16] calling into question even the claim that the Dalai Lama is Buddhist (see, for example, International Shugden Community 2013: 10–15; 2014b,).

In response, during 2015 some Tibetans began counter-demonstrations against some New Kadampa centres (because NKT members form the vast majority of ISC protesters), calling the group an "extremist Buddhist cult" (Buddhism-controversy-blog.com 2015).

16 In a similar attempt to discredit, Alex Jones suggests that Barack Obama is a practicing Muslim (Infowars.com 2016).

Home
Notifications
Messages
Search Twitter
Reply to
24 Sep 2015
I noticed The Express have used your "Donald Lama" meme as part of their news story :-)
Dalai Lama or Donald Lama?
Sexist, Racist, Misogynistic - which is his true face?
www.AreBuddhistsRacist.com
10
1
24 Sep 2015
yeah, the buggers clipped the web address off the bottom of it though
10

FIGURE 7.4 Screenshot of public discussion on @indyhack's Twitter feed, which combines the face of the Dalai Lama with controversial US presidential candidate Donald Trump (whose racist and misogynistic statements were frequently denounced in the UK press) (Indy Hack 2015b)

So, who benefits from these exercises in public defamation and group solidarity? Both sides rely on production of doubt about 'opposition' evidence while encouraging loyalty to 'authentic' information from 'approved' sources supporting their own position, both from personal contacts and in trusted social media networks. This increases group solidarity for both the Shugden supporters and Dalai Lama supporters in the short term. Both groups become more isolated in their networks of trust, more fervent in the righteousness of their cause. Aspects of both side's conspiracy theories are likely to be true. But the primary reason for the vehemence with which each side holds its beliefs, and continues vocal demonstrations both online and on the street, is not so much to do with convincing evidence, but with demonstrating loyalty to a group and cause for which it is believed it is worth making sacrifices.

6 Conclusion

Conspiracy theories and beliefs are cultural, social, and specific to particular communities. They are anti-hegemonic, stigmatised knowledge narratives, where "the proposed explanation must conflict with an 'official' explanation" (for instance from government or other authoritative sources) (Coady 2007: 198). They function to strengthen a community, 'us', against 'them'. This does not mean that we can assume that people accept whole-heartedly all the beliefs and theories they encounter within a trusted community. In his research on a Pentecostal and millenarian church, Damian Thompson (2005) concluded that although believers professed allegiance to millennial doctrine, they actually assigned a low priority to the more marginal aspects of end times teachings. He reflected "I suppose if I had to boil it down to one observation, it would be that just because people say they 'believe' that such-and-such a thing will happen in the End Times that doesn't mean they invest heavily in those colourful beliefs. It's a sort of spiritual hobby, even entertainment" (Thompson 2011). And crucially, although people didn't actually believe "the really weird stuff," Thompson found that they did identify with the community (2005).

Those positing a conspiracy often focus on the hidden puppeteers behind the scenes, engineers who maleficently orchestrate world events to the detriment of the 'regular people'. However, seen sociologically, the practical benefit in the case of conspiracies relates little to the alleged perpetrators of the conspiracy, be they the Bilderberg illuminati, the New World Order, Shugden or the Chinese Communist Party. The famous question *cui bono?* (For whose profit?) may be better suited to those who ascribe to the beliefs and/or theories themselves, and as such join a community (real or virtual) of like-minded believers who will reinforce their fears and validate their beliefs, and as such help in the process of creating an identity that helps them navigate the risk and uncertainties of the wider society. Truth and facts can become a relational position based on ideology and loyalty in the case of many subcultural groups. From the perspective of marginal religious groups, belief in conspiracy theories might be very rational and come with social benefits of group solidarity, identification with a clear moral and belief-based community. The point of the theory is not necessarily about its truth, but about the effects of the belief for individuals within socially marginalised networks. However, exchanges between the marginalised networks, majority opinion, and political powers can have far-reaching and sometimes unintended consequences.

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CHAPTER 8

Popular Music, Conspiracy Culture, and the Sacred

Christopher Partridge

1 Introduction

Is it significant that a number of musicians, including Robert Johnson, Brian Jones, Alan "Blind Owl" Wilson, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Pete Ham, Jim Morrison, Pete de Freitas, Kurt Cobain, Kristen Pfaff, Amy Winehouse, and Jeremy Michael Ward died at the age of 27? Can any of these musicians now speak to us from beyond the grave? Indeed, are some musicians who are commonly believed to be dead, such as Elvis, actually alive and well? And are some musicians who are commonly believed to be alive and well, such as Eminem, actually dead? Perhaps others, such as Jay-Z, are undead. Even if he is not a revenant, are he and his wife, Beyonce Knowles, members of the Illuminati? And what about the subversive, affective power of popular music *per se*? Has it been used by communists and demons to undermine Christian societies? For example, is the worship of Satan promoted through the use of 'back-masked' occult messages on records? Even if it isn't, do rock musicians embed ideas in their music that manipulate young people into committing acts of violence and even suicide?

There are a number of reasons why popular music cultures engender such conspiracy theories. The aim of this chapter is to identify and to explain these. One way of doing this is to separate popular music conspiracy theories into two principal types, both of which draw on key themes within contemporary occulture: exogenous conspiracy theories and endogenous conspiracy theories. Exogenous conspiracy theories have their roots in an external perception of popular music culture as profane—typically a perception of popular music as a threat to society in general and to adolescents in particular. Endogenous conspiracy theories concern those internal discourses that emerge within popular music culture itself, which typically relate to the peculiar significance of an artist or a piece of music in the life of the fan.

2 A Note on the Sacred, the Profane, and Transgression

To argue that popular music is centrally concerned with 'the sacred' is not to say that it is centrally concerned with 'religion'. In other words, while the

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sacred is, of course, fundamentally related to religious discourses, it is not limited to them. Rather, the sacred, as it is discussed here, is closely related to the sociologically nuanced understanding articulated by Émile Durkheim and developed within contemporary cultural sociology. That is to say, the sacred, whether embedded with religious discourses or not, concerns those culturally determined ideas that exert a profound moral claim. These articulations of the sacred, these 'sacred forms', comprise, as Gordon Lynch puts it,

> constellations of specific symbols, thought/discourse, emotions and actions grounded in the body. These constellations of embodied thought, feeling and action recursively reproduce the sacrality of the sacred form and constitute groups who share these discourses, sentiments and practices.
>
> LYNCH 2012: 29

Hence, sacred forms are historically contingent expressions of particular cultures, the products of particular histories and contexts, rather than being ontologically fixed in any way—as in the case of Mircea Eliade's understanding of the sacred (Eliade 1959). They change over time according to the shifting cultural contours of the societies in which they are constructed (see Alexander 2003: 27–84).

Sacred forms, moreover, need to be understood in a relational or oppositional sense. That is to say, cultural constructions of the sacred are tied to constructions of 'the profane'. As Jeffrey Alexander puts it, we can think in terms of a binary code that "serves the mythological function of dividing the known world into the sacred and the profane, thereby providing a clear and compelling picture of how contemporaries must act to maneuver the space in between" (2003: 200). Furthermore, not only is the profane constructed as a threat to the sacred, but it accrues a transgressive charge relative to the strength of the sacred: the stronger the sense of the sacred, the greater the revulsion evoked by that which threatens to profane it. Indeed, the revulsion—the sense of profane threat—occasioned by the transgression of a sacred form, such as the abuse of children, the violation of human rights, or, indeed, blasphemy, can be so powerful that it can lead to moral panic and, for some members of society, sanction extreme levels of violence (Thompson 1998). There is a sense in which the source of profanation must be expunged at all costs in order to limit its polluting influence and to allow for the restoration of the authority and integrity of the sacred.

This understanding of the sacred and the profane is important because popular music is typically transgressive. It operates across the boundaries that separate the sacred and the profane. Emerging within liminal youth cultures

that challenge prevailing constructions of the sacred, it often celebrates the offence it provokes: "Sex and drugs and rock and roll / Is all my brain and body need / Sex and drugs and rock and roll / Are very good indeed" (Ian Dury, 'Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll', *New Boots And Panties!!* 1977); "I love the dead before they're cold / They're bluing flesh for me to hold" (Alice Cooper, 'I Love the Dead', *Billion Dollar Babies* 1973); "Incurable disease on the day of rest / I go walking on water in a sea of incest / I've got the image of Jesus embedded in my chest… Jesus, won't you touch me? Come into my heart / Where the hell are you when the fire starts?… Satan is by far the kindest beast" (Christian Death, 'Spiritual Cramp', *Only Theatre of Pain* 1982). That is to say, popular music typically interrogates and challenges core sacred forms relating to drugs, religion, sex, violence, and death (Partridge 2014). Understanding this helps us to appreciate not only its affective force and its appeal to liminal lifeworlds, but also its relationship to conspiracy culture's hermeneutics of suspicion and semiotic promiscuity (see Partridge 2005: 288–295).

3 Exogenous Conspiracy Theories

The most conspicuous generators of exogenous conspiracy theories about popular music are, unsurprisingly, those discourses most closely associated with strong constructions of the sacred, especially those of primary religious institutions. However, while the tendency towards conspiracy belief is evident in most conservative religious and political discourses, this discussion will primarily focus on the Western Christian suspicion of popular music.

In order to understand the genesis of Christian anti-popular music conspiracy theories, it will be helpful to begin with H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of theological approaches to culture. The first type he discusses is the "Christ against culture" approach, which views religion and culture in terms of a stark either-or binary: "Whatever may be the customs of the society in which the Christian lives, and whatever the human achievements it conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them, so that he confronts men with an 'either-or' decision" (1951: 40). This theological approach constructs the culture of the Other as a specific site of profanation managed by agents of maleficence. As Niebuhr puts it,

> it appears as a realm under the power of evil: it is the region of darkness, into which citizens of the kingdom of light must not enter; it is characterized by the prevalence in it of lies, hatred, and murder; it is the heir of Cain. It is a secular society, dominated by "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life." (1951: 48)

Such combat mythologies, organised around dualistic notions of spiritual warfare, encourage the believing community to understanding itself as an *ecclesia contra mundum*, which constantly needs to identify and resist the forces of profanation: the Bride, the Lamb, and the New Jerusalem stand *over against* the Harlot, the Beast, and Babylon. Biblical passages such as 1 Peter 5:8 are frequently rehearsed in support of a conspiratorial hermeneutics of suspicion: "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." Hence, while culture may look benign and entertaining, Christians should remember that it rarely is, for "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). The appearance of beneficence typically masks a reality of maleficence.

This belief in a covert threat to society is, of course, central to the construction of conspiracy beliefs. As Michael Barkun has discussed, conspiracy and secrecy are "indissolubly linked" (2003: 4). Whether we think of (a) a malevolent agent acting secretly or (b) openly, or (c) a known, apparently benign agent acting malevolently in secret, the suspicion of a covert threat to core sacred forms is central to conspiracy culture. Again, as Barkun comments (quoting Daniel Wojcik),

> the essence of conspiracy belief lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil. At their broadest, conspiracy theories "view history as controlled by massive demonic forces." The locus of this evil lies outside the true community, in some "Other, defined as foreign or barbarian, though often … disguised as innocent and upright." The result is a worldview characterized by a sharp division between the realms of good and evil. (2003: 3)

Dualism, to some extent, is a central feature of conspiracy theories.

This belief that the profane operates under the guise of innocence encourages "semiotic promiscuity" (Partridge 2005: 284), an irresistible bias towards interpreting almost anything as a verification of conspiracy belief: everything has meaning; all events are planned; nothing can be trusted because nothing happens by accident; and everything is connected (Barkun 2003: 3–4). Moreover, semiotic promiscuity is fundamentally related to a commitment to empirical verifiability. That is to say, in the form of a rather crude teleological argument, there is an attempt to expose maleficent agency by identifying empirical details that, cumulatively, suggest design. As such they are parsimonious in their reduction of highly complex phenomena to simple causes (Barkun 2003: 7). Consequently, the affective force of popular music, its sonic dissonance, its hypnotic beats, its explicit articulation of profane discourses, its unfamiliar symbols and its conspicuous influence within youth cultures, all

provide important evidence of malign purpose. For example, soon after April 20, 1999, when two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, embarked on a shooting spree at Columbine High School, ending in their suicides following the murders of twelve of their fellow students and one teacher (see Altheide 2009: 1354–1370), conservative anxiety quickly coalesced into a conspiracy theory about goth music culture. While many Christians understood the massacre to be a direct result of the progress of liberal values and the decline of practices such as Bible reading and prayer in schools, others, such as Bob Larson, were convinced that the violence was a direct result of the music the perpetrators had listened to. They had exposed themselves to demonic influence: "demons … forced the hands of Klebold and Harris" (Bivins 2008: 114). And, Larson had evidence: "the kids who got shot were Christians. The kids who shot them were not Christian. It's like—duh, excuse me, there's a message here. The kids who got shot were not listening to Marilyn Manson and playing Doom" (Larson, quoted in Bivins 2008: 114).

This last point is an important one concerning exogenous popular music conspiracy theories. Popular music threatens that most central of sacred forms, the purity of the young, who, as in premodern accusations of witchcraft, are considered to be "especially vulnerable to the activities of witches" (Almond 2008: 18). Good children from good homes are being defiled and parental authority is being undermined. Sacred forms relating to the protection of the child are central to much conspiracy theologising around popular music. Childhood and adolescence are periods during which members of society are introduced to a set of ethical norms and principles that sanction certain practices and prohibit others. This moral socialisation of children ensures the future health of society, in that the successfully socialised child will grow into an adult who respects society's dominant sacred forms. Hence, for a number of related reasons, the protection of children from profanation is perceived as a categorical imperative, an absolute, unconditional moral requirement that asserts its authority in all circumstances. As such, it is typically central to religious discourses. To violate the innocence of children and to corrupt them morally is to strike at "the very temple of the sacred" (James *et al.* 1998: 152). The profanation of children is both the corruption of innocence and a direct threat to the future of a 'civilized society'. As the British Conservative politician Nicholas Fairbairn said of Genesis P-Orridge's performance project, COUM Transmissions, "these people are the wreckers of civilization" (P-Orridge 2002: 163). While he was not himself a Christian conspiracy theorist, nevertheless his statement of outrage expresses a core element of the concern conspiracy theorists have about popular music.

Historically, conservative evangelical moral crusaders have, as Jason Bivins comments,

> maintained vigilance against the possible seductions of leisure time and the "taint" of fallen cultures… Beginning in the 1970s, peaking in the 1980s, but very much still a part of public culture … anti-rock preachers saw in the popularity of rock music a series of social dangers and widespread falsehoods—most powerfully expressed in heavy metal and rap—that captured for them the larger process of socio-political decline. (2008: 90)

Having said that, the claim that anti-popular music discourse began in the 1970s is a little misleading. Christian conspiracy beliefs about popular music, which became prominent in the 1970s, have many substantial precedents. Certainly in the modern period, popular music—including nineteenth-century music halls, jazz, and blues—has been a perpetual cause of anxiety for the religious right who worry about the progress of the profane and the collapse of social order. More recently, as Eileen Luhr has shown, "during much of the post-1945 period, popular music provided conservative Christians with a catchall explanation for everything that was geopolitically threatening, physically perilous, or spiritually sinister." She continues:

> their fears intensified in the 1960s. Assertions about rock music differed as to its precise sins, but conservatives generally agreed that the genre was a pernicious force in American society. Held to be synonymous with the counterculture and the 1960s, rock 'n' roll was thought to have conspired with communist and satanic groups, encouraged miscegenation, altered sexual mores, and incited sustained social unrest.
>
> LUHR 2009: 38

Again, focusing on the threat posed to key sacred forms, conspiracy theories emphasised the subversion of Christian culture through the profanation of the young.

To develop this last point a little, occasioned by the growth of the counterculture, the emergence of New Left social criticism and Easternisation, popular music became central to Christian conspiracy theories about the profanation of young minds by competing ideologies and religions. As the titles of books such as David Noebel's *Communism, Hypnotism and The Beatles* (1969), Larson's *Hippies, Hindus and Rock 'n' Roll* (1972a), and Lowell Hart's, *Satan's Music Exposed* (1981) suggest, a number of malevolent influences were identified.

Noebel, for example, was an industrious and influential conspiracy theorist who articulated the anti-communist concerns of the religious and political far right. For many years he was a member of the John Birch Society—a right-wing organisation with a strong bias towards conspiracist discourse (John Birch Society 1995; Allen 1995)—and, prior to that, a McCarthyite evangelist for Billy James Hargis's fundamentalist Christian Crusade. He was also the Dean of the Christian Crusade Anti-Communist Youth University and founder of Summit Ministries in 1962. During the 1960s and 1970s he consistently argued that popular music had become central to a communist offensive against American Christian values. As such, it was understood to be part of a wider conspiracy to instigate the demise of the Christian West.

Noebel's anti-popular music rhetoric is typical of conspiracy discourse, in that it is characterised by a theological and political dualism, a particular hermeneutics of suspicion, and semiotic promiscuity. Consequently, appearance and reality are systematically deconstructed. Nothing is as it appears. For example, "some of the fronts for Communist machinations and operations in the United States have been certain record companies" (Noebel 1966: 30), notably the ostensibly innocent Young People's Records and the Children's Record Guild. Rather than concluding that these organisations were what the empirical evidence suggested they were—companies interested in producing and distributing music for children—Noebel argued that they were in fact cultural facades for communist mind control. It was precisely their proximity to the young and their benign appearance that aroused his suspicion. Using techniques developed within clinical hypnotism, communists used popular music "to invade the privacy of our children's minds, to render them mentally incompetent and neurotic" (26–27). However, he says, this is only the tip of the iceberg:

> our younger children are not the only ones being tampered with by the communists. Our teenager [*sic*] is also being exploited. Exploited for at least three reasons: (a) his own demoralization; (b) to create in him mental illness through artificial neurosis; and (c) to prepare him to riot and ultimately revolution in order to destroy our American form of government and the basic Christian principles governing our way of life. (10)

Again, the argument is that beginning with small children and progressing to adolescents, popular music is an apparently innocent, but actually potent means of undermining the culture, religion, and politics of the United States and the West.

Noebel, like other conspiracy theorists, locates popular music's profane potency not simply in the lyrics, but in the composition of the music itself: "the barrier between classical music and certain types of popular music" has been transgressed by communists in an attempt to substitute "a perverted form … for standardized classical form." Communists, in other words, are actively seeking to subvert Christian culture through a particular type of composition, which has the ability to overturn hierarchies of cultural value by replacing music that ennobles with "jungle noises" (1966: 12). This naïve understanding of music introduces us to the far-right racist roots of Noebel's rhetoric: communists are "inundating the American public with the music of Negro people" (14). Indeed, it is very clear that, in seeking to identify popular music as a communist attempt to introduce anarchy, he wants to characterise it as that which is *other than* Christian, Western, white, and civilising (Ostendorf 1997). To some extent, of course, such rhetoric can be found throughout the history of Christianity. As Timothy Fitzgerald (2007) has argued of Protestantism, there is a discourse—conspicuously articulated within the history of missions—concerning the rationality and civility of Protestant nations over against the irrational barbarity of non-Christian 'heathens'. It is, to a significant extent, this self-representation of civility and rationality over against the backwardness and profanity of "the heathen" that is threatened by popular music and that subsequently leads to the construction of conspiracy theories. In other words, popular music, associated with 'uncivilised', 'heathen' societies, threatens the sacred by reversing the missionary process. Noebel is unapologetically explicit about this: popular music is "a designed reversion to savagery" (1966: 78). The argument, such as it is, claims that "the origins of rock 'n' roll can be traced back to 'the heart of Africa', where the rhythms of drums were used to incite warriors to such a frenzy that by nightfall neighbors were cooked in carnage pots!" Drawing explicitly on racist stereotypes, he insists that the music of Africans, "the true epitome of popular music," is "sexual, unchristian, mentally unsettling and riot producing" (78–79). The communists, he argues, having realised this, banned it in their own societies (Noebel 1965: 6–7; 1974: 69) and introduced it into Western societies in order to create delinquency, "scientifically induced neuroses," and, in the final analysis, "a generation of young people with sick minds, loose morals and little desire or ability to defend themselves from those who would bury them" (1966: 81; 1969: 14, 25). He claims that:

> communists have a master music plan for all age brackets of American youth. We know from documented proof that such is the case for babies, one- and two-year olds with their rhythmic music; we know such

> is the case for school children with their rhythmic music and university students with their folk music. (1966: 14–15)
>
> NOEBEL 1966: 14–15

Repetitive music, rooted in the heathen savagery of Africa (Noebel 1974: 45), has been used by communists to "brainwash" the most vulnerable members of American society in order to undermine its values and instigate its collapse:

> the frightening—even terrifying—aspect of this mentally conditioned process is the fact that these young people, in this highly excited, hypnotic state, can be told to do practically anything—and they will. One can scarcely conceive of the possibility … but nevertheless the method exists, wherein the enemies of our Republic could actually use… The Beatles (or some other rock 'n' roll or even rock 'n' folk group) to place thousands upon thousands of our teenagers into a frenzied, hypnotic state and send them forth into the streets to riot and revolt.
>
> NOEBEL 1966: 90–91.

As we have seen, however, for the conspiracists of the religious right, communism is not the only maleficent agent of profanation to use popular music. Indeed, communism is itself part of a cosmic superconspiracy, at the controlling apex of which is the cardinal source of all profanation: Satan. Within Christianity, the essential role of Satan has always been that of opposition and his relationship to the Church has, therefore, been interpreted primarily in terms of struggle and resistance, articulated as a dualistic combat mythology. The opposition to popular music, therefore, is constructed as an engagement in the perpetual struggle between the Apollonian sacred and the Dionysian profane, between the forces of goodness and order and those of evil and chaos.

John Blanchard's anti-popular music rhetoric is typical in this respect, being primarily oriented around three premises: first, "Satan and his forces have deeply invaded man's social and cultural structures—and music has not been left out"; second, "one of the greatest powers possessed by Satan and his agents is their ability to appear harmless, benign, or even helpful"; and third, Satan and his agents "have the power to bring about physical, mental and spiritual disorder, as well as to cause their victims to be gripped by sin of one kind or another" (1983: 40–41). Again, these premises reflect the key principles informing most conspiracy theories: nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; everything is connected. Social unrest, secularisation, shifting moral standards, adolescent despair and violence,

religious pluralism, popular music and so on are all connected and all betray the design of a demonic intelligence. Likewise, Jeff Godwin—the author of *The Devil's Disciples: The Truth About Rock* (1985), *Dancing With Demons: The Music's Real Master* (1988), and *Rock and Roll Religion: A War Against God* (1995)—contends that popular music is used by Satan to corrupt children, destroy families, subvert "true religion," and undermine Christian civilisation. It has, he argues, "smeared smut" throughout American culture and consistently "preached rebellion, hatred, drug abuse, suicide, fornication, and the dark things of Satan" (quoted in Bivins 2008: 97; see also Häger 2000). Again, in his study of the dynamics of Satanic panics—that is, moral panics generated by conspiracy beliefs relating to a fear of Satanism—Jeffrey Victor discusses Mike Adams' conspiracist rhetoric, central to which is the conviction that "Satan is attempting to capture the souls of our youth through rock and roll music." Victor attended one of his seminars, during which he was subjected to "a litany of claims about how rock musicians promote drug addiction, sexual orgies, and violence." Adams even insisted that "70 per cent of all rock musicians are homosexuals" and that "many hundreds of teenagers commit suicide each year because of the Satanic influence of rock music" (1993: 167–168).

While we have seen that a number of methods of profanation have been identified by conspiracy theorists, one of the most popular has been the subliminal communication of messages using a technique known as "backward masking" or "back-masking." While this production technique, which records words or sounds in reverse on a track, has been employed for aesthetic and even comedic purposes, the fact that it was done covertly within a profane culture made it a natural target for conservative conspiracy theorists. Some even claimed that Satan himself was inscribing the messages. Hence, Christian campaigners, such as Jacob Aranza (1983, 1985), Jeff Godwin (1985, 1988), and Texe Marrs (1989), have made much of the subliminal profanation of the young through popular music, and by the 1990s claims were being made that back-masking was actually being used to incite suicide and murder. So serious, of course, were the implications of such conspiracy beliefs that they even led, unsuccessfully, to a court case in 1990 against the band Judas Priest who had, it was claimed, back-masked an incitement to suicide on the song 'Better By You, Better Than Me', from their 1978 album *Stained Class* (Anderson and Howard 1994; Kahn-Harris 2007: 27–28; Sampar 2005; Walser 1993: 145–147).

Bearing the above discussion in mind, it is unsurprising that even musicians with conservative religious convictions who use popular music for the purposes of worship and evangelism risk accusations of covertly insinuating the profane into personal and institutional sacred space. Christian popular music, it is argued, is consistent with the fifth column tactics of the agents of

profanation. Indeed, according to Hubert Spence, "the world has come to love gospel music, because gospel music has become worldly in its presentation." As such, he insists, along with Christian popular music generally, it is now a key factor in the "world's full acceptance of the Antichrist" and the emergence of a New World Order. Popular music, he claims, "will be the final instrument to set the world in a mood to bow to the image of the Son of Perdition" (2011: 222; on New World Order conspiracy theories, which inform this type of anti-popular music rhetoric, see Barkun 2003: 39–64). Similarly, according to Larson, all popular music should be viewed with suspicion. From musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which betray clear evidence of "satanic inspiration," to "so-called gospel music," Christians are "being deceived" (Larson 1972b: 204; 1999: 23). Again, Blanchard also insists "the case against the use of pop music in evangelism is overwhelming" and that "using it in evangelism is spiritually perilous" (Blanchard 1983: 21, 154; see also, Blanchard and Lucarini 2006).

Finally, this type of exogenous conspiracy theory has contributed to a broader stream of occulture that extends beyond conservative Christian concerns about popular music. In particular, there are a number of mind control theories. Perhaps the most significant of these is Project Monarch, which has been most influentially developed by Cathleen (Cathy) Ann O'Brien with the assistance of her partner, Marquart (Mark) Ewing Phillips, who identifies himself as a former US Department of Defense subcontractor with substantial knowledge of mind control research. Project Monarch is linked to the occulturally significant MK-ULTRA project of the 1950s, for which, it is claimed, the CIA used a range of techniques to create alter egos that could be controlled for nefarious ends.

O'Brien was the wife of Alex Houston, a country musician who performed for children with a ventriloquist puppet called Elmer (Houston and Elmer 1972). Houston was, she claims, a paedophile involved in the production of sex slaves. Indeed, beginning with abuse by her own father shortly after she was born, she believes herself to have been the victim of mind control and subsequent serious sexual abuse all her life. This included sexual assault by a long list of public figures. Interestingly, her testimony seems to draw on and certainly supports right wing suspicions about the dangers of popular culture. Not only are the government and the entertainment industry colluding in the sexual exploitation of children, sometimes for occult purposes, but popular culture is central to the techniques used to control victims:

> My television, books, and music became … strictly controlled and monitored… This was … for total mind-control conditioning purposes.

> For example, the annual televising of Judy Garland's *Wizard Of Oz* was celebrated as a grand holiday around my house. This was to prepare my mind for future base programming on the theme that I, like Dorothy, could "spin" into another dimension "Over the Rainbow." After all, "Birds (Byrds) fly over the Rainbow…" was a theme that became a part of my life.
>
> O'BRIEN with PHILLIPS 1995: 91

Her reference to "Byrds" and "another dimension" concerns Senator Robert C. Byrd and the locations to which she was taken for abuse.

> My family routinely vacationed at Mackinac Island, Michigan, which is a small island positioned in the Great Lakes close to the Canadian border. Mackinac Island, with the Governor's Mansion and historical Grand Hotel, was a political playground where I was prostituted by my father to, among others, paedophiles Jerry Ford, Guy VanderJagt, and later U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd. The mind-controlled part of me that was prostituted there perceived Mackinac as another dimension, the timelessness of which was enhanced by the island's antiquated styling.
>
> O'BRIEN with PHILLIPS 1995: 88–89

Concerning her former spouse, he was one of a number of country musicians involved in Project Monarch and Satanic ritual abuse, including Jack Greene ("the Jolly Greene Giant") and Wayne Cox (a "Satanist" who, she claims, she was promised to in marriage and who fathered her daughter, Kelly):

> Jack Greene's band member, Wayne Cox … took my friend and me on a "flashlight tour" through the rubble of Union Station, until we came to a homeless man sleeping on the ground. Cox ordered me to "kiss the railroad bum good-bye," then shot him between the eyes while I was still only inches away. He then used a machete to chop off the man's hands, which he put in a zip-lock bag. He then led us up the rickety stairs into the lower of the old depot. There Jack Greene, his band members, and others dressed in black robes were gathered around a black leather altar in a room lit by candles and draped in red velvet. In total shock, I was laid on the alter and subjected to rape and torture while the participants indulged in sex, blood, and cannibalism ritual. The next day I woke up on Cox's couch, vaguely aware that I had suffered a "bad nightmare." When I stood up, I passed out from blood loss. I was bleeding profusely from the vagina. It was all I could do to prepare to drive back

> to Michigan, and my friend was certainly not in a stable frame of mind to help. I did not know what happened to me, nor was I able to question it. I had a new "obsession" on my mind. I had been programmed at the ritual to move to Nashville and marry Cox, as ordered by Senator Byrd … As Byrd's "own little witch" (sex slave), I would also become involved in covert government operations… In typical Project Monarch structure, Byrd was my "owner" and in control of my life, while Cox became my primary "handler" and followed Byrd's orders to ensure that I was at key locations and events at appointed times and to maintain me under mind control.
>
> O'BRIEN with PHILLIPS 1995: 101–102

It should be noted that, while some of the individuals mentioned by O'Brien are identified as Satanists and carry out ritual abuse, unlike the Christian right, she is not primarily concerned with occultism. O'Brien's conspiracy theory focuses on government mind control and sex crimes. Nevertheless, her engagement with, and contribution to conspiracy occulture has led to the development of these ideas in a way that involves popular music and occultism more centrally. Since the publication of her book, co-authored with Phillips, *Trance Formation of America* (1995), numerous related conspiracy theories about the mind control of musicians and the creation of alter egos have emerged. While there are, of course, a number of musicians who have flaunted their alter egos, such as Eminem/Slim Shady, Beyonce/Sasha Fierce, Nicki Minaj/Roman Zolanski, and Lady Gaga/Jo Calderon (DeNicola 2013), these artists are of less concern to conspiracy theorists than those who display all the signs of an alter ego, yet seem unaware that their minds are being controlled. A prominent current example of this is Miley Cyrus (daughter of the country musician Billy Ray Cyrus), who has been transformed from the wholesome Hannah Montana of the popular Disney series to the provocative, sexually explicit bad girl of pop. For the conspiracy theorist this suggests evidence of 'Beta' programming, which, it is claimed, was used by Project Monarch to create "sex kittens" (slaves) for dignitaries, for occult rituals, and for the corruption of America's youth. While O'Brien and Phillips don't mention Beta programming in *Trance Formation of America*, its influence on the development of these ideas is conspicuous. What most people don't realise, the *Vigilant Citizen* website revealed, is that Miley Cyrus

> was selected and programmed to be … a "good girl gone bad," a process the occult elite wants the public to constantly witness. They want the

> masses to see innocence and wholesomeness turn into sleaze and trash. They want pop culture and the youth in general follow the same process. While alchemy is about turning stone into gold, the masses are made to witness the opposite process… If "observers" and "critics" took their faces out of her bony behind and took a step back, they would maybe see what is truly happening: Miley Cyrus is, more than ever, owned and controlled by an enormous machine. Her image, her music and her performance is fully determined by her handlers. For some sick reason, she was chosen this year to embarrass herself and to traumatize all of the young people who grew up watching her. Miley was offered as a "sacrifice" to the public while adding to the complete breakdown of popular culture. Her performance was choreographed and staged to be as annoying and distasteful as possible… While the masses are laughing and pointing at Miley Cyrus, those who handle her are laughing and pointing at the masses … because they're falling right into this sick humiliation process… She's a puppet and we need to look at those who are pulling the strings. We also need to look at what they are doing to people such as Miley Cyrus and, more importantly, to our youth in general. This is not about a single girl who lost her way, it is about a system making the world lose its way.
>
> *Vigilant Citizen* 2013

4 Endogenous Conspiracy Theories

For many people in advanced capitalist societies, shaped by "the massive subjective turn" of modernity (Taylor 1991: 26), popular culture is increasingly the primary, if not the only, space where existentially meaningful commitments can take shape. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that fandom and devotion have emerged as overlapping fields of discourse. Certainly, it is not uncommon for studies of celebrity culture to argue that fan culture has replaced institutional religion as a space within which meaning and devotion are constructed in secular societies (Rojek 2001: 51–100). However, while there is clearly a continuity between the two, in that fan culture is able to provide a context for devotion, there is also an important discontinuity, in that there is a process of conversion that separates the fan from the devotee. While recognising confluences and areas of overlap, it is also important to recognise this distinction in order to avoid an all-too-common category mistake. Fan obsession does not necessarily signal 'devotion'. There needs to be some form of conversion,

a "passage, a 'turning from and to' that is neither syncretism nor absolute breach" (Austin-Broos 2003: 1). This process involves the "transfiguration" of the celebrity (Partridge 2015: 137–156). For example, the death of Diana Princess of Wales on August 31, 1997, led very quickly to her transfiguration in the minds of some people (Richards *et al*. 1999). While many simply found her an inspirational figure and mourned her passing, others converted to a sanitised and sanctified idea of her. They *turned from* an understanding of her as a popular member of British royalty and *to* an understanding of her as having some form of transcendent significance. A few even began to receive messages from her ascended spirit. Books such as *The Celestial Voice of Diana: Her Spiritual Guidance to Finding Love* by the Norwegian Rita Eide (2001), *Princess Diana's Message of Peace: An Extraordinary Message of Peace for Our Current World* by Marcia McMahon (2003) and *In Her Own Words: The After Death Journal of Princess Diana* by Christine Tooney (1999) disseminated the channelled wisdom of a transfigured Diana. Individuals who had been fans of her during her life had, at her death, converted to devotees. Such understandings of a transfigured Diana go beyond the fan's celebration of her significance.

This is relevant to the current discussion, because, while there are a number of broadly secular conspiracy theories relating to musician's deaths, when thinking specifically about the relationship between religion and conspiracy theories, it is this type of belief that tends to encourage endogenous conspiracy theories. While these are not as dependent as exogenous conspiracy theories on starkly dualistic constructions of the world as evil, nevertheless, they do articulate a form of "soft dualism." For example, the transfigured artist may be interested in promoting world peace and mitigating negative energy: "Darling, it's great to hear your vibration," says John Lennon to Marcia McMahon during one of her channelling sessions. "I have to adjust my earphones as we're rehearsing for a special show… George [Harrison] and I came up with it, of course… Lady Diana … sends her love… The show is all about what you can do for peace… Mother Teresa is assisting Diana in the project. Well, anyway, George and I got roped in, so to speak" (McMahon 2012: 136–137). And while the focus is always on the iconic significance of a transfigured artist and on that artist's continuing relevance and supernatural ability to provide succour, conspiracy theories are employed to provide a fiduciary framework within which to explain the deaths of such important beings.

To unpack this process a little further, it is not surprising that the transfiguration of the deceased is far more common than the transfiguration of the living. First, the dead no longer have the capacity for unfortunate manifestations of humanness. At death, the history of the celebrity is fixed and theological

reconstruction can begin. Flawed individuals, such as Elvis, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, and Tupac Shakur, at their deaths, are sanitised and canonised. Second, death forces a strategy of immortalisation, which often includes the construction of conspiracy theories that ensure the celebrity's sentient life is not completely extinguished. Third, immortalisation also universalises the celebrity's presence. Whether the celebrity is thought to have faked death or has died and continues to communicate with the devotee in some way, there is always the possibility of succour. As such, the process logically encourages a practical understanding of post-mortem omnipresence. Fourth, generally speaking, because many musicians die young, this has a particular resonance with fans because, not only is youthful vitality fixed, but they have died at the height of their influence. As David Halberstam says of Elvis and Marilyn Monroe, "their early deaths added to the power of their mystique, for they remained forever the gods of youth, and we were spared having to see them grow old" (1994: 8). Subsequent, metaphorical identification, typical within fan cultures—for example "Elvis is king" or "Elvis lives"—becomes, through the processes of transfiguration and conversion, religious identification—for example Elvis as living saint: "he prays for us in heaven" (quoted in King 1993: 103; compare Doss 1999: 69–114). The conversion of the fan into a devotee entails the conversion of fan discourse into theological discourse.

As indicated above, the process of transfiguration typically requires a strategy of immortalisation, which is often supported by a conspiracy theory explaining the apparent death of the artist. The most common of these conspiracy theories simply deny the death. Hence, while there were numerous conspiracy theories about the causes of Jim Morrison's death, including the belief that an ex-girlfriend had murdered him "long-distance from New York by witchcraft" (Hopkins and Sugarman 1980: 372), the most popular conspiracy belief was that he "pulled off the ultimate ruse and faked his own death" (Riordan and Prochnicky 1991: 466–467; see also, Hopkins and Sugarman 1980: 373–374). Similar claims have been made about a number of other dead musicians from Kurt Cobain to Michael Jackson (Shircore 2012: 140–142; Ra Imhotep 2012). However, the most widely circulated examples of such endogenous conspiracy theories concern Elvis. Having become a cultural obsession in America following his death in 1977 (Marcus 1991), the process of his transfiguration quickly led to a number of conspiracy beliefs. Reports of his father's refusal to reveal the details of the autopsy led to the belief that, for a number of reasons, he had faked his own death and gone into hiding. It wasn't long before other apparently anomalous information was drawn on to support the conspiracy theory. For example, why was the spelling of his middle name "Aron," as recorded on his

birth certificate, changed to "Aaron" on his gravestone? The answer, of course, is that he was not in fact buried beneath the stone at all. Either as an indication to his fans or because of personal superstition, he had asked for the name to be misspelled. Again, since 1977, there have been a number of audio recordings of Sivle Nora (the reverse spelling of Elvis Aron), a name he apparently used when booking recording studios (Brewer-Giorgio 1988: 91, 160–161). There have also been suggestions that, for example, he was seen booking a flight to Argentina in the name of Jon Burrows and that "he had been given a new identity under an FBI witness-protection programme" (Shircore 2012: 272).

Such claims about Elvis—and there are many more (Brewer-Giorgio 1988, 1990; Doss 1999; Reece 2006; Shircore 2012: 268–272)—have, in turn, led to what amounts to a sacred history of sightings, which, like testimonies in faith communities, strengthen the commitment of those who believe he is alive and often stimulate similar experiences (Reece 2006).[1] For example, Louise Welling, having "insisted that she and her daughter had seen Presley at two separate places, once at a Burger King in downtown Kalamazoo, Michigan, and then again at the Felpausch supermarket in Vicksburg, Mississippi … triggered a slew of people claiming they had seen Elvis in a Las Vegas parking lot, sweeping up floors in Stockholm," and even selling unofficial merchandise outside a 2002 Oasis concert in London (Mejia 2015).

Of course, because the phenomenon of Elvis sightings has itself become a recurrent theme within Western occulture, it is always a little difficult to know whether reports are genuine or spoof. What is clear, however, is that Elvis is a transfigured being within some lifeworlds and, as such, some sightings are genuine faith events supported by deeply held conspiracy beliefs. Indeed, Gail Brewer-Giorgio (1988: 15) makes an explicit connection between her own conspiracy theory about Elvis and Hugh Schonfield's *The Passover Plot* (1965), which posits the theory that Jesus unsuccessfully planned to fake his own death. While both theories have proved rather difficult to establish, what is clear is that, mythic narratives, typically shaped by Christian discourse in the West, have been constructed by the faithful in order to support the continuing significance of Elvis in their lives. Of course, not all of those persuaded by Elvis-is-alive conspiracy theories are devotees. The point is simply that the relationship between Elvis transfigured and conspiracy culture is a very close one.

It is not uncommon for such "event conspiracies" to expand into 'systemic conspiracies' and even superconspiracies (Barkun 2003: 6). This is evident, for example, in discussions about the "27 Club." While, for many fans, this is simply

1 See also *Elvis is Alive*: At http://www.elvis-is-alive.com. Accessed 05/05/2015.

a list of musicians who have died at the age of 27 (Sounes 2013), for others, unable to accept the apparent coincidence, it is interpreted within a broader framework of conspiracy:

> Why the number 27? It has been claimed that these musical idols were killed by the Illuminati in ritual sacrifice. 27 is 3×3×3, which is a perfect cube. Plato claimed that 27 represented the cosmos and the elite are making their statement that they rule the cosmos. In Feng Shui, the number 27 equals wealth, and millions have been made from these stars.
>
> FREEMAN 2012: 1–2; see also OWEN 2012

> They're connected by their age, three to the third power, divinity multiplied by itself.
>
> SEGALSTAD and HUNTER 2008: 299[2]

In other words, the number 27 becomes significant in itself, providing the key to a fundamental esoteric connection between each of the individuals who died at that age (Segalstad and Hunter 2008: 270–280). While this line of numerological reasoning is often disjointed and lacking in cogency, nevertheless, again, it does provide some explanation for the death of a musical icon in a way that increases that icon's significance. It lifts them out of everyday mortality and places them within a privileged discourse that recognises their elevated significance. They died because they were special.

Unfortunately, however, the evidence on which such theories are based is weak. While some popular music authors, such as Charles Cross, insist that "the number of musicians who passed away at 27 is truly remarkable by any standard," there being "a statistical spike" for musicians who die at that age (2007), in fact, studies have shown that there are comparatively few musicians who have died at this age. For example, one study identified three deaths at age 27 amongst a sample of 522 musicians at risk, giving a rate of 0.57 deaths per 100 musician years. And because similar death rates were observed at ages 25 and 32, the study was able to conclude that the age of 27 was relatively insignificant (Wolkewitz *et al.* 2011; compare Sounes 2013: 14–19). Indeed, bearing in mind that the vast majority of 27 Club "members" are relatively obscure, if one were to list all the dead musicians that have had a recording career, whether famous or not, it is clear that only a small percentage died at the age of 27 (Hann 2015). However, that it has become a phenomenon in popular music

2 See also the discussions and comments on the *Forever 27* website: http://www.forever27.co.uk. Accessed 05/05/2015.

mythology is typical of conspiracy culture, in that, in much the same way as a number of random aircraft and ship disappearances in a loosely defined region of the North Atlantic were spatially gathered together in an expanding 'Bermuda Triangle'/ 'Devil's Triangle', so a number of random deaths of musicians are temporally gathered together in the 27 Club. Once the 27th year of an artist's life had been established as significant and a pattern identified, the process of conspiracy construction became difficult to arrest. Very little could be considered coincidence. Other dead musicians are found to support the conspiracy theory and, because the musician is aged 27, self-harm, drug abuse, misadventure, and illness tend to be ignored as adequate explanations for death.

While the members of the 27 Club are dead (or, at least, ostensibly so), and while some musicians such as Elvis, Jim Morrison, Tupac Shakur, and Michael Jackson are widely understood to be dead, but considered by a few to be alive, other artists who are widely understood to be alive, are believed by a few to be dead. That they seem to be alive to the majority of their fans is because they have been replaced by doppelgangers. For example, the "Doppelganger and Identity Research Society" claims that the rapper Marshall Mathers, who uses the pseudonyms "Eminem" and "Slim Shady," died and was replaced by a lookalike.[3] One of the earliest and most culturally significant of these endogenous doppelganger conspiracy theories concerns Paul McCartney who, it was rumoured, had actually been killed in 1967 in a road traffic accident involving his Mini Cooper. Although rumours of his demise had begun to circulate following the accident, eventually a conspiracy theory coalesced, principally informed by claims made in an article by Tim Harper published on September 17, 1969, in the *Drake Times-Delphic*, a student newspaper at Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa. The article discussed a number of clues that, it was claimed, had been disclosed on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and *The White Album* (1968), including the back-masked message "turn me on, dead man" and "cherish the dead" on "Revolution 9" (Harper 1969: 1). This led to further claims, some of which were aired on October 12, 1969, in a live phone call to the radio presenter Russ Gibb of Michigan's WKNR-FM. For example, it was claimed that the cover of *Abbey Road* (1969) depicted a funeral procession, including a barefooted doppelganger of McCartney walking out of step with the rest of the band. This, it was argued, symbolised the corpse in the procession. This interpretation was supported by a number of other clues: John Lennon is wearing white, symbolic of the clergy; Ringo Starr is dressed in black, depicting the mourner; and George Harrison is wearing jeans, apparently typical of

3 Doppelganger and Identity Research Society. At http://doppels.proboards.com/thread/230/eminem-replaced?page=5. Accessed 10/02/2015.

a gravedigger's garb. Again, it was claimed that, in the final section of "Strawberry Fields Forever," Lennon declares, "I buried Paul." Indeed, following Harper, conspiracy theorists have made much of both *Sgt. Pepper's* and *The White Album*. For example, McCartney is the only one with his back to the camera on the back cover of *Sgt. Pepper's*. More significantly, the title track introduces listeners to "the one and only Billy Shears," which, some have concluded, is the identity of McCartney's replacement. Further evidence of his death can be found in the song "A Day in the Life," in which we are told that "He blew his mind out in a car"; on the *White Album*, the song "I'm So Tired" includes a barely decipherable back-masked message that some understand to state, "Paul is dead. Miss him, miss him"; and the song "Don't Pass Me By" includes the lyric, "You were in a car crash and you lost your hair."

While, of course, such endogenous conspiracy theories are often mundane and secular, not only do they indicate the peculiar significance of artists in the lives of fans, but also, it takes very little for them to become embedded within occulture and, as such, to become imbricated within other more esoteric conspiracy theories. Indeed, there is some truth to Peter Bebergal's suggestion that the "'Paul is dead' rumors set the stage for the album cover to become an occult emblem" (2014: 99). Because the artwork of *Sgt. Pepper's* provided important evidence of a conspiracy for the semiotically promiscuous, album covers, such as that of Led Zeppelin's untitled fourth release (1971), started to be read as esoteric documents.[4] As Harper noted of *Sgt. Pepper's* in his catalytic article, "on the front cover a mysterious hand is raised over [McCartney's] head, a sign many believe is an ancient death symbol" (1969: 1). "Everyone I knew," recalls the designer Paula Scher about *Sgt. Pepper's*, "stared at the cover for hours on end, unlocking special, secret clues to its meaning" (quoted in Bebergal 2014: 59).

The Beatles, of course, who, we have seen, are understood by some to be a source of countercultural profanation, have found themselves at the centre of a number of popular music conspiracy theories, both exogenous and endogenous. Indeed, they were the inspiration behind one the darkest moments of the 1960s. On August 9, 1969, police entered the house of Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate to find a scene of carnage. Five people had been brutally murdered in a frenzied attack, including Tate who was pregnant. Using her blood, the word "pig" was scrawled on the front door. The following night further gory, ritualised murders were carried out at the home of Leno LaBianca and again blood graffiti was found. This time, however, some of the words seemed familiar: "Helter Skelter" (Bugliosi and Gentry 1992: 246). The murderers were members of "the Family," followers of Charles Manson, who had, for them, become

4 See, for example, *Is Paul Dead.com*. At http://www.ispauldead.com. Accessed 14/05/2015.

transfigured; he was a messiah; a channel of revelation. He, in turn, had his own source of revelation. He had become convinced that The Beatles, through their music, were urging him to incite a race war. Interpreting their songs according to an idiosyncratic reading of the biblical Book of Revelation, Manson constructed an endogenous conspiracy theory around a transfigured understanding of The Beatles as "prophets" and "the four angels" (Bugliosi and Gentry 1992: 322). Consequently, their lyrics required detailed analysis and careful interpretation in order to elicit their meaning for the faithful. "Revolution 9," for example, was "telling the black man that *now* was the time to rise and start it all" (329). This was "Helter Skelter"—race war. "Are you hep to what The Beatles are saying?" Manson asked his followers after listening to *The White Album*. "Helter Skelter is coming down. The Beatles are telling it like it is." As Paul Watkins, a member of the Family recalled shortly after the murders, "he builds this picture up and he calls it Helter Skelter, and what it meant was, the Negroes were going to come down and rip the cities all apart… After this … we started listening to The Beatles' albums constantly" (Bugliosi and Gentry 1992: 330).

More recently, a number of dark, endogenous conspiracy beliefs have begun to cluster around the identity of the rapper Jay-Z. For example, a photograph by Sid Grossman taken in 1939 entitled "Harlem Loiterers" was discovered in 2013 by Sylviane Diouf, a curator of Digital Collections at the Schomburg Center, New York Public Library. Because the photograph portrayed a man with a remarkable likeness to Jay-Z, rumours started circulating that the likeness was more than skin deep. But how could he appear the same age as he is now back in 1939? Perhaps he is able to travel through time? Or perhaps, by some occult means, he has been able to evade the ageing process (Smart 2013)? For some, this provides further evidence of the involvement of Jay-Z and his wife, Beyonce Knowles, in the Illuminati. To some extent, such conspiracy theories have been encouraged by Jay-Z (Dice 2013). As well as wearing clothing bearing provocative logos such as Aleister Crowley's "Do What Thou Wilt," he has made astute and commercially strategic use of occulturally suggestive symbolism, which has provided significant grist for the semiotically promiscuous (D 2011: 59; see also Beaumont 2012; Dice 2013; Weishaupt 2014). For example, his video for "On the Next One," which is replete with occulturally suggestive signifiers, has encouraged the belief that it reveals the occult secret of his enormous success, which, it is assumed, can't simply be the result of talent and an astute business mind. Rather, as Bebergal comments, "the truth is that Jay-Z sold his soul to the devil—seen clearly in those horns that flash during the video. But this is not any devil. This is Baphomet, believed by some to be the hidden god of the Freemasons revealed during the 33rd degree ritual, who paves the way for the initiate to become part of an even greater fraternity known as the Illuminati."

Hence while his lyrics suggest that he is in control of his own destiny, in actual fact, "he might be merely a pawn in a sinister game of control" (Bebergal 2014: 212; see also Dice 2013). Indeed, other rappers, such as Professor Griff (formerly of Public Enemy) have suggested that, even if he is unaware of it, nevertheless Jay-Z is "helping the Illuminati use hip hop as a way to infiltrate the black community" (Bebergal 2014: 214). Rehearsing the same arguments articulated within the anti-popular music rhetoric of exogenous conspiracy theorists, such as Noebel and Larson, there is a concern amongst some within hip-hop culture that the music is being used as a form of mind control. Again, everything is not as it seems. Hence, some worry that the music industry is itself an instrument of profanation, inviting "the Illuminati to stage rituals as the music is being produced, instilling it with demonic energy" (Bebergal 2014: 214; see also Dice 2013).

5 Conclusion

Historically, popular culture has always tended to generate suspicion, it being viewed by some as a Dionysian force for immorality and 'anarchy,' as Matthew Arnold argued it in his influential 1869 essay (1971). Popular music's affective power, its prosthetic ability directly to engage humans, to move their bodies, to shape their identities, and to influence their thinking has led to it becoming a very particular cause for concern. This concern about its affective power is exacerbated by the fact that, informed by the liminal discourses of youth culture, it typically celebrates transgression (Partridge 2014). While, of course, one can always cite examples of popular music that support hegemonic constructions of the sacred, generally speaking, it interrogates and challenges sacred forms. It presses against the boundaries of the sacred and foregrounds the profane. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that its otherness, its perceived threat to the sacred, generates exogenous conspiracy theories about a range of concerns from the corruption of youth to the subversion of Western Christian values by communists, the Illuminati, and Satan.

We have, however, also seen that popular music conspiracy theories can be endogenous, in that they are generated *within* fan communities. While they are often concerned with explaining a perceived evil, such as the death of an artist, unlike exogenous conspiracy theories, they are typically beneficent, rather than maleficent. That is to say, the music and the artist are understood by the fan to communicate valuable truths—even if that information is then interpreted according to a wider systemic conspiracy that generates or supports, as in the case of Charles Manson, destructive beliefs and acts of violence. Moreover, we have seen that endogenous conspiracy theories are typically

beneficent because they often emerge during a process of transfiguration. Artists are canonised and, as a result, their life and work attains a peculiar and ultimate significance. This typically leads to semiotic promiscuity, in that little about a transfigured artist's life and work can be considered accidental or mundane. While the catalyst for this process is often the artist's death, this is not always the case.

Finally, endogenous conspiracy beliefs can also reflect, draw on, and even merge with exogenous conspiracy theories. Consequently, a transfigured artist can be maleficent as well as beneficent. This is particularly the case when artists become associated with wider systemic conspiracies and superconspiracies, such as those concerning the Illuminati (Dice 2013). Because nothing happens by accident in conspiracy culture, individuals perceived to have significant wealth and power, such as musicians like Jay-Z, are suspected of a Faustian pact.

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CHAPTER 9

Close Companions? Esotericism and Conspiracy Theories

Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal

1 Introduction

Claims about secret societies, hidden knowledge, and obscure, superhuman elites are a stock element of conspiracy theories. They are also common features in the history of 'Western esotericism', an umbrella that covers just about any topic found on the 'New Age' shelf of your local bookstore: occult sciences, Rosicrucian brotherhoods, Theosophy, ritual magic, alternative histories of sunken continents, and millenarian expectations of a coming new age of 'expanded consciousness'.[1] Not only have esoteric orders, such as the Illuminati, the Rosicrucians, or the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O) been the subject of grand conspiratorial narratives, but also esotericists frequently deploy conspiracist tropes when narrating their own history, polemicising against competitors, or explaining the marginality of their own ideas.

In this chapter, we investigate the relationship between esotericism and conspiratorial discourse and reasoning. While the *demonisation* of esotericism as expression of a sinister conspiracy is a crucial aspect of this relationship, we are especially interested in the phenomenon of 'esoteric conspiracism', or *conspirituality* (Ward and Voas 2011), and will consider why the confluence of esotericism and conspiracy theories occurs. We draw equally on historical, sociological, and psychological research in order to explore these complex relationships. Our main focus is on the dynamics of the *shared milieus* in which esoteric and conspiracist ideas are developed and disseminated, and their interaction with historical and contemporary establishments and mainstreams (building on previous work, see Dyrendal 2013; Dyrendal and Asprem 2013; Asprem and Dyrendal 2015).

The concept of the "cultic milieu" (Campbell 1972) is central to this analysis. Esoteric ideas and practices have come to be seen as species of 'rejected' and 'heterodox' knowledge (Hanegraaff 2012), and are typically organised in loose

1 For a useful overview, see Hanegraaff *et al.* (2005).

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networks and short-lived groups where members (or 'seekers') move quickly from one thing to the next. We will argue that the deviant status of the cultic milieu (as Colin Campbell theorised it) comes with a particular kind of *motivated reasoning* (Kunda 1990) that creates a bias towards conspiratorial interpretations of events. Moreover, the cultic milieu holds the key to make sense of the ideational analogues between 'occult' and 'conspiratorial' thinking, and to shed light on how certain psychological factors, such as individual difference predictors of 'conspiracy mentality', are embedded in concrete sociocultural contexts. In short, certain kinds of people may be more likely to enter the milieu than others; once a part, involvement with particular groups and practices will provide motivations ensuring that psychological predispositions manifest in different ways, from conspiracy narratives that attribute sinister patterns to socio-political events, to magical 'correspondences' that perceive hidden connections in nature. These issues are crucial for understanding the observed confluence between contemporary 'alternative' spirituality and conspiracy theories (Ward and Voas 2011; Asprem and Dyrendal 2015), but also for seeing how similar tendencies (such as inferring hidden agents behind events) can manifest in very different ways, in accordance with the situational needs of specific groups.

Our argument, in short, connects the history of Western esotericism (especially the recent historiographic trend of viewing it in relation to a narrative of 'othering', 'deviance', and creation of 'rejected knowledge') with psychological and sociological research on conspiracy theories, connected through the 'cultic milieu' model originating in the sociology of religion. We will begin by connecting the history of esotericism to the cultic milieu model, continue by highlighting some thematic links between esotericism and conspiracist tropes, and suggest some relevant historical dynamics. We then turn to consider the multifarious motivations of individual actors, building down to underlying psychological and personality factors that, according to existing studies, help explain the distribution of conspiracism as well as involvement with esoteric new religious movements.

2 The Attraction of Heterodox Knowledge: Esotericism and the Historicisation of the Cultic Milieu

'Esotericism' refers to a set of practices and discourses on the intersection of European religion, philosophy, and science that have, historically, come to be rejected by the institutions that decide what counts as real knowledge. As Wouter Hanegraaff (2012) has demonstrated, a conglomerate of Neoplatonic

and hermetic spiritualities, 'ancient wisdom' narratives, paganism, and occult sciences were gradually extirpated during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, by theologians who found in them the seeds of paganism and superstition. The enlightenment projects that ensued in the eighteenth century finished the job from the position of secularising philosophy, science, and historiography. Although many of the subjects now viewed as esoteric were widely spread and occasionally sanctioned as integral parts of medieval and renaissance worldviews, this early-modern rejection process has relegated such currents to an 'underground' that we now recognise as 'occultism' or 'Western esotericism'.

In the 1970s, sociologist Colin Campbell wanted to explain why new religious movements, or 'cults', are rising and falling with such rapid frequency, leading him to postulate the existence of a social entity that he termed the "cultic milieu." Cults, Campbell argued, arise from a milieu that supports religious experimentation and innovation while inhibiting the formation of stable and long-lasting institutions (Campbell 1972). This supportive, seedbed milieu is characterised by a network-based circulation of rejected knowledge, a shared ethos of seekership, and a shared identity based on deviance and opposition to perceived orthodoxies. Milieus of this sort are permanent features of any society, Campbell held, but, due to the role of deviance in producing shared identity across the milieu, their content and thematic concerns are entirely contingent on the nature of establishment institutions at any given point in history.

The historical, diachronic study of Western esotericism tells us something about the specific content and thematic concerns of the (Western) cultic milieu, while Campbell's theory helps us accounts for the *synchronic* aspects of how these 'deviant' representations and practices tend to be produced, shared, and structured in small-scale groups, and how they relate to society at large. In short, the study of Western esotericism *historicises* the cultic milieu in the European history of religion (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015: 379–380).[2] In the present section we show, first, how the diachronic perspective provided by the study of Western esotericism helps us explain the provenance and prominence of conspiracist narratives and subgenres that proliferate in the cultic milieu even today. This already leads us to consider the central concerns of this chapter, namely, the multiple dynamics and characteristics of this cultic milieu whereby, for instance, the "memory traces" of its history provides its participants with motivations for theorising conspiracy, and a language in which to do it. In

2 This suggestion is not entirely original: notably, Hanegraaff explained the New Age movement as resulting from a particular phase in the cultic milieu's historical development (Hanegraaff 1996: 17).

the following, we will draw on both historical and contemporary examples to show how the 'mnemohistory' of esotericism (Hanegraaff 2012) supplies historical background for some central topics and tropes of conspiracy culture, encourages some of the cognitive elements central to conspiracism and, thus, contributes to the contemporary cultic milieu's susceptibility to theorising conspiracy.

3 Diachronic Aspects: Esotericism and Conspiracist Narratives

Scholars now generally agree that esotericism is not a tradition, but rather a contentious historical category that covers very diverse and complex currents arising from the competition between religious, scientific, and philosophical systems of knowledge (von Stuckrad 2010; Hanegraaff 2012; Asprem and Granholm 2013b). However, while it is precisely the rejectedness and (often retrospective) deviance that makes certain currents stand out to us today as part of esotericism, there also appears to be a positive, substantial element at the heart of these rejection processes. This substantial element is the creation of "ancient wisdom narratives" in late antiquity, which crystallised in the Christian Neoplatonism of the Renaissance. In what has been called a "Platonic orientalism,"[3] Neoplatonists tended to trace the origin of 'True Wisdom' back to ancient, pagan sages, such as Zarathustra, Orpheus, or Hermes Trismegistus. This strategy later permitted Renaissance philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Lodovico Lazzarelli, and others to harmonise Platonising philosophy and their attendant theurgic practices with a Christian narrative, by stressing an eternal, perennial wisdom underlying the true faith.

In the Christian context, ancient wisdom narratives were, however, always in danger of being deemed heresy. During the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, then, the ancient sages and their Neoplatonist Christian spokesmen were indeed cast as demonically inspired pagan infiltrators, exerting a corrupting influence on the Christian religion from within (Hanegraaff 2012: 90–100). To reformers, the tale of pristine wisdom trickling down through history became the tale of how 'pagan error' survived through the ages, corrupting the true faith.

During the Enlightenment period, these inverted ancient wisdom narratives were disembedded from their theological context and recast in terms of 'bad philosophy' and 'erroneous science'. The Renaissance 'history of truth' gave way to the Enlightenment's 'history of error', and the ancient sages morphed

3 On this concept, see Wallbridge (2001); Burns (2006); compare Hanegraaff (2012): 12–17.

into ancient fools (Hanegraaff 2012: 130–136; compare Asprem and Granholm 2013a: 34–35).

Hanegraaff (2012) convincingly argues that the stigmatisation of certain kinds of knowledge associated with what was perceived as the corrupting influence of pagans and the *Urdummheit* of the ancients carved out the cultural space that is now referred to as Western esotericism. Starting in the nineteenth century, people who were discontented with the rapid social, political, and religious upheavals that followed in the wake of the revolutions and the industrialisation of society, found a useful resource for opposition in this body of rejected knowledge. The great heresiological works and the Enlightenment catalogues of irrational follies covered precisely the sort of 'authorities' with which the modern occultists came to identify. The ancient sages once more became the sources of 'tradition', but a sort of tradition that was now already cast as oppositional, underground, and potentially dangerous. Ancient wisdom had been remade as rejected, and possibly suppressed, knowledge.[4]

The dynamics of rejected knowledge has allowed self-defining occultists to understand themselves as standing in a perennial tradition that is, moreover, in essential opposition to an establishment that actively undermines the liberating wisdom of the ancients (compare Webb 1971). The workings of this Establishment—whether pinned on the church, the state, or on scientific institutions—is easily and effectively cast in conspiratorial terms. But the dynamic of stigmatised knowledge also allowed spokespersons who identify with the Establishment to view the "heresy-peddling" occultists as subversive, internal enemies, working to corrupt the true faith, upset public morals, and spread false knowledge through secret societies and clandestine networks. Thus, in yet another historical turn, some of the esoteric initiatory societies that drew on this ancient wisdom narrative were later adopted into conspiratorial narratives, recasting them as hidden forces at work in history. This trope is particularly expressed in the "mythology of secret societies" (Roberts 1971) that emerged from the anti-Masonic theories of the eighteenth century, and expanded drastically to include occultist lodges such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Ordo Templi Orientis in the early twentieth century (for examples, see Webster 1924; Inquire Within [Stoddard] 1930; Miller 1933).

4 In agreement with this interpretation, Julian Strube (2016) has recently shown that the affirmative occultism of the early nineteenth century took shape in underground socialist (Saint Simonian and Fourierist) milieus in France—that is, in networks that were already politically deviant and oppositional. This was notably the case with Alphonse Louis Constant (occult pen-name: Éliphas Lévi), who has since become the grandfather of all occultist movements since the late nineteenth century.

Summing up, a series of historical shifts has created a set of conspiratorial tropes as well as a dynamic of opposition coalescing around the category of esotericism associated with 'rejected/suppressed knowledge', 'hidden traditions', and 'initiatory societies'. Conspiratorial tropes and perceived deviance have become crucial to group identity work in the cultic milieu, constituting the way history is 'remembered', both within the milieu and by its (real and imagined) opponents. Memory practices that establish an 'us' and a 'them' are essential to the structuration of practices and discourses. Some patterns of memory practice in the more recent cultic milieu, notably the identification of self with historically persecuted minorities and their rejected, suppressed beliefs and practices, relate to subcultural competences and resources that, when motivated, actualise conspiracy reasoning, often as a response to perceived marginalisation or persecution. Historically, the interlocked dynamic of occultist self-understandings and a public stigma on occultism has been exceptionally productive in generating conspiracy narratives of repressive establishments on the one hand, and of subversive undergrounds on the other.

4 Some Further Topics and Tropes: Hidden Masters and Secret Societies

In addition to the abovementioned dynamic, which, we argue, is central to the structuration of identity in the cultic milieu and the motivation to engage in conspiracism, the history of Western esotericism also delivers some tropes and themes that have become influential in conspiracist milieus overall. Here, we shall consider one particularly productive one: that of 'hidden masters' and its relation to the mythology of 'secret societies'.

The narrative of 'ancient wisdom' and its inversions lends the topical resource of 'hidden masters' who possess secret knowledge and control hidden networks. Hidden masters are one set of "usual suspects" in what Barkun calls improvised millennialist superconspiracies (2003), exemplified in the writings of modern authors such as David Icke or Jim Marrs. The hidden masters trope has, however, a deeper history, having served similar roles in fascist, fundamentalist, and Catholic theories about the Illuminati, sometimes even more explicitly tied to esotericism.[5] This is particularly well illustrated by the mythology of secret societies, especially those rooted in eighteenth-century suspicions of the Illuminati as a revolutionary, power-hungry network tied to esoteric powers.

5 For an overview of the "mythology of secret societies," see Roberts 1971. For a particularly intriguing example of creativity, Ziegler (2012: 50–73).

In the early twentieth century, theories about the Illuminati had fallen out of use, as older panics were long forgotten. The British fascist Nesta Helen Webster (1876–1960) re-introduced the Illuminati to conspiracy discourse, reviving the post-Revolutionary conspiracy theories of Abbé Augustin Barruel (1741–1820) and John Robison (1739–1805). The superconspiracy that she invented included, as one title indicated, a wide range of *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* (1924), many of which related to the family of (real and imagined) esoteric societies.

The list still supplies reference for contemporary conspiracy theorists, but it was already recycled in Lady Queenborough's *Occult Theocrasy* (1933). Lady Queenborough (Edith Starr Miller)—another right-wing author of esoteric conspiracy lore—largely repeated and expanded on Webster's claims. Later in the same century, we find the same trope and its villains recirculated in fundamentalist—and 'conspiritual'—conspiracy lore,[6] often borrowing explicitly from each other.

Initiatory societies create clear boundaries between inside and outside, structured around (levels of) secret (and sacred) acts and insights. It is unsurprising that these practices of secrecy, both real and imagined, provided fuel for conspiratorial auteurs. The notion of hidden masters becomes particularly important in this context (see, for example, Pasi 2013: 117–118; Hammer 2001: 380–393). Linked with both secrecy and initiation, this notion has been central to esoteric discourse at least since the Rosicrucian manifestos of the early 1600s. It continued in high-degree Freemasonry and neo-Templarism, and became central not only to the occult fiction of authors such as Bulwer-Lytton, but also to real-life groups such as the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Here, the idea that certain human beings have attained a level of initiation that has endowed them with physical immortality and supreme magical powers was typically linked to the origin myths and legitimisation of authority within the groups.

The notion that secret masters operate behind the scenes of history was an absolutely essential part of the worldviews of nineteenth-century occult organisations. Access to the masters was a source of charismatic authority, and thus a frequent locus of dispute (Asprem 2015: 651–652). But the notion of hidden or ascended masters also implies a 'positive conspiracy theory', explaining events through the secret machinations of a grand, and ultimately benevolent conspiracy of which one's own organisation is part. Such positive conspiracy narratives are found far beyond the seminal groups just mentioned. Manly P. Hall's *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (1928) is an influential schoolbook

6 See for instance Schnoebelen (1991); Springmeier (1995); Robertson (1991); Icke (1999).

example from early-twentieth century esotericism. However, just as with the ancient wisdom narratives, a simple act of inversion is all it takes to turn such positive theories into narratives of clandestine manipulation for sinister ends.

The history of esotericism is ripe with examples of this rhetorical strategy, fuelled by predictable social dynamics. One of them is the outsider use of revelation from the 'mystical margins' as counter-subversive, insider 'testimony'. Saint-Yves de Alveydre's (1842–1877) vision of the subterranean city of Agartha and its political system of 'synarchy' illustrates it well: while Saint-Yves saw the Agarthian synarchists engaged in a secret plot to install a utopian esoteric theocracy, the narrative has since fuelled conspiracy theories about hidden bad guys, whether behind the Vichy government, the European Union, or something much grander that involves aliens and impending apocalypse (Picknett and Prince 1999; compare Godwin 1996; Osterrider 2012). More recently, Alice Bailey's theosophically inspired prophecy that the Great White Brotherhood would establish a world government of enlightened and peaceful rule after the Second World War has enjoyed a similar fate among those fearing a New World Order (see Asprem and Dyrendal 2015: 380).

Such inversions are, however, not the sole precinct of outsiders: esoteric insiders have happily used variations of this strategy. For example, the notion of 'counter-initiation' that is central to René Guénon's (1886–1951) perennialist (or Traditionalist) reworking of Theosophy, proved an effective way of branding other esotericists whom one disapproved of as agents of the conspiracy bringing about the degenerate modern world (Pasi 2013: 117–136; Sedgwick 2005). In the case of the perennialists, the conspiratorial rhetoric against occult competitors is tied directly to a dystopian vision of the present, a utopian vision of the distant past, and the promise of a spiritual revival in the future. In another version of this theme, occultists sceptical of spiritualism had warned against the possibility that mediums were secretly being exploited by a conspiracy of advanced magicians in the pursuit of sinister goals (for example Hardinge Britten 1876; compare Godwin 1994: 197–199). Annie Besant (1847–1933), president of the Theosophical Society and a leading proponent of various anti-Establishment discourses including feminism, vegetarianism, anti-imperialism, and independence for the British colonies, accused the rebellious founder of Anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), of being in the pocket of the (spiritually repressive) Jesuits (Webb 1976: 228). Steiner, on his part, saw the sinister workings of Ahriman's black brotherhood at work behind a broad range of contemporary political and social events (Steiner 2004; Dyrendal 2013: 204–206). In other words, in the competition between specific groups and systems in the occult milieu, the boundaries between underground subversives and establishment elites often get blurred.

5 Correspondences and Semiotic Promiscuity

The 'ancient wisdom' narratives that undergird the identity formations of modern occultism also establish a mode of thought that closely mirrors Barkun's description of stigmatised knowledge-claims. Since the truth is not to be found in open mainstream sources, but always remains hidden, suppressed, or veiled, esoteric spokespersons need special strategies for unveiling hidden knowledge and making it visible. These unveiling strategies often rely on pattern-finding manoeuvres, typically building on the more traditional notion of 'correspondences' (for example Faivre 1994). In effect, this cognitive orientation makes the combination of esoteric and conspiratorial modes even easier. As Michael Wood and Karen Douglas (this volume) note, there is a correlation between conspiracy thinking and a "holistic cognitive style"; that is, a style of thought more interested in the big picture and connections between elements than in an analytic focus on individual details. However, we may also see the impact of history and (sub)culture in how these holistic and analytic modes are expressed: some conspiracist strategies are, for example, borrowed directly from, or mirror those of esotericism (see Dyrendal 2013; Asprem and Dyrendal 2015), from the choice of symbolism to preferred hermeneutical devices such as numerology or gematria, to 'secularised' correspondences between events.

Antoine Faivre's world of esoteric correspondences, where "everything is a sign; everything conceals and exudes mystery; every object hides a secret" (1994: 10), is a fair representation of conspiracism's style of semiotic promiscuity. If in esoteric thought "the entire universe is a huge theatre of mirrors, an ensemble of hieroglyphs to be decoded," and that they are "meant to be read and deciphered" (10), we need merely exchange the interest in the 'universe' with an interest in 'history', 'economics', and 'politics' to translate to conspiracism (Dyrendal and Asprem 2013).

We may illustrate this with a few current sources that relate 9/11 to Templars and Freemasons. The first is from bibliotecapleyades, a conspiritual site that is primarily an archive for 'research' that fits the site's agenda. Many of them (including our first example) are anonymous. Drawing on another writer,[7] our anonymous author first 'establishes' that the Templars "were recognized at Clermont in 1118," then points out that "1+1+1+8 = 11," and moves on to find a series of nines and elevens meaningfully involved (Bibliotecapleyades, n.d.). Among these meaningful numbers are allegations of nine founding Templars in 1111, followed by nine years without taking in new members. The author then moves on to other significant events on September 11 throughout history,

7 Robert Howard (n.d.), who will serve as our second example below.

mainly ones that have involved United States authorities (Bibliotecapleyades, n.d.). The repetition of nines and elevens are used to ascertain meaning and retrospectively foreshadow the target event. Since it is the numbers and correspondences that count, any symbol, event, or narrative will do.

This includes popular culture and religion. Our second example, Robert Howard, the author that was used to establish some baseline 'facts' for our first example, finds it telling that the famous Satanist Anton LaVey proclaimed *nine* satanic statements and *eleven* rules of ethics ("rules of the earth" [Howard, n.d.]). Both Howard and the bibliotecapleyades author use simple gematric transformation in their numerology, and both draw on the anti-Masonic conspiracy tradition rooted in the Taxil hoax (see, for instance, Introvigne 2016). The events of 9/11 and earlier events drawn from Masonic, esoteric, or more mundane history are scoured for symbolic correspondences revealing the traces of a grand plan and hidden planners.

With deeper and broader links, the growing conspiracy hints at more ultimate meaning, exemplified in the contribution of another anonymous writer. Like Howard's article, the text is from the conspiracy-focused Forbiddenknowledge.com, and this particularly numerologically astute writer reveals other correspondences hinting towards a deeper history. The author starts uncovering the mystery of 9/11 with a mystical "Brotherhood of the Serpent" in ancient Sumer, and then moves on to ancient Egypt:

> overlooking the 7 World Trade Center towers is the Statue of Liberty, Isis/Mary the Tower of Seven, wearing a 7-pointed crown. Just as in the sky Sirius (Isis) stands beside the 3 stars of Orion's (Osirus' [sic]) Belt, on the ground Isis (the Statue of Liberty) stands beside 3 collapsing towers.
>
> The three buildings that collapsed, buildings 1, 2 and 7, perfectly replicate in size and distance both the 3 pyramids at Giza and the 3 stars in Orion's Belt. WTC buildings 1 and 2 were very tall with a shorter building 7 off to the side. Similarly, there are 2 large pyramids at Giza and a smaller pyramid off to the side. Not to mention, before being destroyed on 9/11 there actually stood a huge model of the 3 Giza pyramids at the base of the World Trade Center.
>
> The Giza pyramids themselves were modeled after Orion's Belt which consists of 2 bright stars and another slightly less bright one off to the side. The ancient Egyptians associated Orion's Belt with the God Osirus [sic], the husband of Isis/Sirius.
>
> Their son is our sun, Horus, the Egyptian *Jesus*. (Forbiddenknowledge, n.d.)

Examples of this type could easily be multiplied. The use of syncretic conflation, assisted by naked assertions about symbolic meanings and correspondences

between above and below as hinting to scheming actors with the exact meaning in mind, serves to make the invisible connections visible, serving up the pattern that connects the villains to the crime.

6 Occult Apostasy and the "Professional Ex"

Discovering all this meaningful symbolism could, perhaps, be perceived as demanding a certain amount of insider knowledge and skill sets. The rhetorical advantage in conspiracist claims-making of 'having been' an initiate creates a habitat for the occult variant of "the professional ex" (Brown 1996): occult apostasy.

Inversion is, like the professional ex, a common feature of conspiracy theorising. It follows the logic of othering out-groups by demonisation. Their combination here is tied both to the social structure of esotericism—the importance of secrecy and initiation—and to the topic of secret societies in conspiracy culture: following in a long tradition of (allegedly) confessing the secrets behind the conspiracy in which one previously took part, lapsed members of occult orders and organisations were able to embody the inversion of occultist self-understandings into conspiracist narratives of secret groups possessing arcane knowledge, occult powers, and dangerously transgressive schemes. Occultist apostates, through their status as 'initiated' into secrets, have provided and legitimised influential narratives that connect a spiritual struggle with secret plots of global political significance.

Many of these apostates have, like the 'ex-Catholic' of anti-Catholic nativism (see, for example, Butter 2014: 137–153) or the 'former Satanic high priest/-ess' of the Satanism Scare (Hertenstein and Trott 1994), had a tenuous or documentable non-existent relation to the groups into which they claimed insight. But some have been both actively tied to a wider milieu, and participants in specific groups. Christina M. Stoddard is an illustrative and influential example of the latter category.

For several years, Stoddard was a member of the Stella Matutina, one of the most influential magical orders springing from the schisms in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (Webb 1976: 225–226). After leaving the order, Stoddard produced a classic of conspiracy lore, *Light Bearers of Darkness* (1930), written under the pseudonym Inquire Within. The book takes the shape of an exposé, alleging that all magical, occult, and fraternal groups she could possibly think of were "consciously or unconsciously" connected to a clandestine and nefarious group of "Judeao-Masonry."

A contemporary example of this apostate dynamic is the Italian Leo Zagami, whose brief involvement with the O.T.O. in the early 2000s allows him to

make claims of first-hand access to secret Illuminati plans (Zagami 2016) that his audience finds credible.

Like less connected apostates, spokespersons such as Zagami and Stoddard participate in the inversion process by which esotericists' narratives of a positive conspiracy that manifests the providential design of history are turned into narratives of sinister forces engulfing the world.

7 Opportunities for Conspiracism: Deviance, Elected Marginality, and Motivated Reasoning

Colin Campbell (1972) famously defined the cultic milieu in terms of a network-based underground, characterised by shared deviance and trafficking with "rejected knowledge." These interact with other factors to create multiple opportunities to apply the language and modes of thought mentioned above in the direction of conspiracism.

They also interact to increase the flow of ideas within the milieu. From the primary characteristic of a "common consciousness of deviance" Campbell derived two other features, namely a tendency toward syncretisation, and a common ideology of seekership (1972: 122–124). As perceived external orthodoxies become a common enemy for those in the milieu, cultic groups and systems that may otherwise differ starkly have a relatively high tolerance of each other, which allows individuals to search for suppressed truth among the diverse systems of rejected knowledge that are on offer.

The notion of suppressed truth is important to the concept of "stigmatized knowledge-claims" (Barkun 2003); operating within a dynamic of explicit epistemic (at times also moral) conflict with normative institutions, a process of reciprocal stigmatisation is tied to the battle over what gets to count as 'true', leaving the field wide open to conspiracy discourse. One set of such opportunities relate to the material practices involved in the thriving entrepreneurial side of the cultic milieu. The exchange of goods and services are a central part of the networking activity of the milieu. These goods and services adapt to changing circumstances, but they invariably combine expressions of the (current) beliefs and values of the milieu. As indicated by the notion of the cultic milieu as centred on heterodox, experience-based religion in tension with church and science,[8] participating in this milieu at different levels may involve lifestyle choices on a broad scale: living 'naturally' without 'chemicals', eating

8 Even though the 'occulture' may often succeed as mainstream, it also tends to reinvent itself as opposition. This is part of the formula for success in its niche: as it continually produces

'organic' food, and enjoying the use of more 'holistic' treatments. Alternative views of the body—'esoteric physiologies'—and its environment are central to the wider milieu (Partridge 2005; Heelas and Woodhead 2004), and the practices related to them even more so.

A lot of this entrepreneurship plays out in arenas of counterknowledge, and derives its value partly from being 'cool'—which entails at least a veneer of 'anti-establishment'. While many such practices are effectively just market niches, the Establishment sometimes strikes back even so. When claims are criticised and practices slated for regulation, control, or even prohibition by authorities, this is easily cast as a symbolic and material threat to many more than those who make their living from the commercial practice itself.[9] It becomes evidence of the Establishment's attack on an entire worldview, reinforcing the shared identity of 'noble/heroic victims' of persecution. Such circumstances may, moreover, call for 'theodicy', a meaningful narrative about why evil occurs, which is one of the primary functions of conspiracy theory (for instance, Barkun 2003).

Thus, closer regulation of the supplements and herbal remedies industry has unsurprisingly been met with conspiracist responses focused on grand plans in which big pharma is just a cog in an even bigger machinery of evil. An article looking at the revision of the Codex Alimentarius sets the tone in its title ("A Threat to Humankind: Codex Alimentarius Commission"), and leaves little room for doubt:

> the pharmaceutical industry has now formed an international cartel by the code name "Codex Alimentarius" with the aim to outlaw any health information in connection with vitamins and *to limit free access to natural therapies on a worldwide scale*.
>
> RATH 2001; emphasis in original

The author, Mattias Rath, is not completely unknown on the conspiracy circuit, but is better known as a prominent seller of vitamin supplements, aggressively marketed as cures for HIV/AIDS in South Africa. Rath has also presented anti-retroviral treatments as "a conspiracy to kill patients and make money" (Goldacre 2009).

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alternative culture, successful products play to a market that has long been devoted to 'cool' and 'rebellion' as consumer strategies (for example Heath and Potter 2004; Frank 1996).

9 For a discussion of the difference between material and symbolic threats, and its possible importance in activation of conspiracist or authoritarian dispositions, see Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Stenner 2005.

The trope 'big pharma' has plenty of well-founded chances for being used in accusations of conspiracy and fraud. But it is also regularly invoked when, for instance, a new set of meta-analysis finds no documented effect from homeopathic remedies. In the wake of one such publication, one of the more laid back comments, with the leading title "Is Big Pharma Trying to Eliminate the Homeopathic Competition?" continued its set of rhetorical questions by intimating: "Could it be that the media is missing the larger story here, that a powerful medical monopoly is seeking to destroy one of its most successful competitors?" Like in the article on the Codex Alimentarius, the author's continued questions implicated a growing number of conspirators before appealing to the readers to find the truth for themselves "by connecting the dots" (Malerba 2015).

The particular stance behind the adoption of conspiratorial narratives varies from the intentional and ideological to the less deliberate. For although conspiracy theories working as theodicy may certainly be formed by *deliberate* attempts to deflect attention from unpleasant facts—for instance that science does not find the claims of homeopathy persuasive—they are probably more often driven by *motivated reasoning* (Kunda 1990).

'Motivated reasoning' refers to a mostly unconscious, defensive strategy for processing and responding to information that contrasts with deeply held beliefs and values. It may be conceived as consisting of an identity-protective 'myside bias' employed in the evaluation of information,[10] employing naïve psychological realism of the states and motives of others (opponents) in a process of rationalisation (Kahan 2011: 20–23). Motivated reasoning is one way of defending against identity threats in the form of cognitive dissonance. The mechanism is active in identity protection from sports to politics, and it also appears to be central to conspiracy thinking (see, for example, Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013; Cassino and Jenkins 2015). While motivated cognition may often lead to highly biased and inaccurate perceptions of states of affairs, Dan Kahan (2017) notes that the resulting claims, when made in the context of an ingroup, may nevertheless be construed as "expressive rationality." When a false belief incurs no immediate cost, but its explicit denial comes with cognitive, affective, and, not least, *social* costs, then reasserting belief and defending it with, for instance, conspiracy theory, may be functionally rational: "individuals derive 'expressive utility', intrinsic and instrumental, from actions that, against the background of social norms, convey their defining group commitments" (Kahan 2017: 4).

10 Myside bias is a subclass of confirmation bias, where "[p]eople evaluate evidence, generate evidence, and test hypotheses in a manner biased toward their own prior beliefs, opinions, and attitudes" (Stanovich *et al.* 2013).

While intuitive thinking along in-group lines may lead to conclusions reinforcing pre-held beliefs, the real implication of motivated reasoning is that engaging in deliberate and careful 'system 2' reasoning will make people even better at picking the data and arguments that support their social identity. In other words, a capacity for reflective thinking may only increase the motivated agent's capacity for rationalising conflicting information. For the cultic milieu, such identity-protective cognition will therefore affect the attitudes and attributions (of causes and intentions) that people seek out. When identity is threatened, by for instance science-based critique, motivated reasoning will help react to the challenge, driving arguments according to the discursive resources available against this particular challenge.

The case of science-based critique is not coincidental. As we have seen, esotericism stands as the result of processes of othering, and its modern heirs have returned the favour by demonising authorised "interpretations of the universe and history" (von Stuckrad 2005: 10). Counterknowledge is the coin of the cultic milieu. Outside the milieu (for example, when considered by specialists of the relevant disciplines that are 'countered') the coin tends to be viewed as counterfeit. This provides motivation for conspiracy theory as a response to destabilising information. Theorising conspiracy is thus both occasioned by, and an active *rejection of*, the marginalisation of esoteric knowledge claims. Indeed, theorising conspiracy becomes an important cultic milieu-niche in itself, re-asserting the truthfulness of counterknowledge and the identity of the *true* epistemic elite. While conspiracy theory may be a theodicy of the dispossessed, agents in the cultic milieu are rarely disenfranchised in any material sense (they tend to be middle class, white, and college educated); more importantly, as David Robertson notes, the active *theorists* generally present themselves as an epistemic counter-elite:

> Whether aligned with left or right political values, millennial conspiracist narratives reframe Marxist critiques in terms of *epistemic* rather than economic capital. The liberation of the oppressed is re-constructed as being realized through a revolution in knowledge, a seizing not of the means of production but of the means of cognition. Knowledge is power.
>
> ROBERTSON 2016: 207; emphasis in original

This is but a more radical formulation of the central role "rejected knowledge" plays in the broader milieu, further underlining the need for a counter-epistemic line of defence. While employing conspiracism as a line of defence may at first seem costly in terms of outsider prestige, the 'costs' of adopting stigmatised positions can confer benefits both individually, for example on

conspiracy entrepreneurs, and functionally, for group cohesion in the milieu. The claims of special knowledge and attendant conflicts are important to the milieu as a nexus of self-identity. The use of outside conspiracy as explanation ties into the structure of the cultic milieu: with rudimentary organisation, soft boundaries, unclear rules of membership, low on doctrine, and thus easily destabilised as a group (Douglas and Wildawsky 1982), theorising evil conspiracy (and confronting it in discursive conflict) as threatening opposition from the outside is one way of conferring a stronger sense of in-group identity.

Theorising conspiracy may be employed strategically, mobilising the many by tying together current and smaller challenges and presenting them as threats to everyone, as in the rhetoric of Rath (2001) cited above. However, it also may be used as a form of sectarian dynamic internally in the milieu. Embracing stigmatised discourse and stigmatised positions creates larger distance to the mainstream. Theorising conspiracy combines 'cultural work' with personal identity work in "its forging of identities and its articulation of a certain conflict" (Butter 2014: 21). Adopting positions that are clearly stigmatised by the mainstream may be used to project a clear identity by intentionally *increasing* tension and marginality. Conflict severs ties to what becomes more and more of an 'outside', leaving bonds on the 'inside' more important than before. The costs of adopting stigmatised positions are not merely something to be weighed against benefits; to some, the apparent costs *are* in fact benefits.

This is particularly true of the millenarian segment of the milieu that presents a comprehensive vision for a completely different society.[11] While proposed solutions may vary (Dyrendal 2016), the view that society is in need of complete transformation is a classic example where social cost may become a group benefit: if you want transformation, you primarily need to reach those willing to take on a stigmatised position and stand up for the cause.[12]

11 Roughly referring to the type of underground millennialism that Hanegraaff (1996) called "the New Age movement *sensu stricto*."

12 Not only does this become a highly marginal political position, like the political cynicism expressed in ventures of wholesale social change (in itself a predictor of conspiracy theory; see for instance Uscinski and Parent 2014; van Prooijen *et al.* 2015), these visions tend to present as utopian; they solve every problem, eventually or in one stroke. Enemies of such a solution quickly ended up being portrayed as evil or deluded, and the rhetoric approaches that of a Manichean worldview. Conspiracy theory gives the utopian aspirant an explanation for opposition and failure (Popper 1963: 342); millennialism gives hope to conspiracism (Barkun 2003: 183). Since millennial expectations have a nasty tendency to fail, the cycle can repeat: when cognitive dissonance sets in and it becomes clear that salvation has been thwarted again, finding someone else to blame seems to be attractive.

8 Psychological Building Blocks

Deviance, as we have seen, is not merely a quality *ascribed* to the cultic milieu and its participants by various authorities; it is also, sometimes as much, *elected* by individuals, whether to signal in-group identity, or to carve out a competitive niche for counterknowledge. The fact that membership in the milieu is largely voluntary (in contrast to ethnic, class, or gender identities, which are less mobile) opens the possibility that certain kinds of people are more likely than others to gravitate towards it. In this section, we use this insight to assess existing evidence that certain psychological traits predict the likelihood of involvement in both conspiratorial thinking and alternative spirituality of the type disseminated through the cultic milieu account for the elective affinities between the two. In doing this we assume a 'building-block approach', which recognises that individual psychological characteristics can be used to realise a number of rather different outcomes on the level of social groups and cultural production (see, for example, Taves 2009; Taves and Asprem 2017; Asprem 2016; Asprem and Taves 2018). What we are after, then, is a set of cognitive and psychological dispositions that appear to be involved in both esoteric and conspiracy oriented thinking, and which may therefore help explain the demographic overlap. In what follows, we will start from established findings in psychological research on both conspiracism and alternative spirituality, using these as a basis for proposing hypotheses about the relationship between the two that should be tested by future research.

As noted by Wood and Douglas (this volume), there is a well-established correlation between paranormal belief and conspiracy belief (see also Lobato *et al.* 2014). Building on this common finding, Lobato *et al.* (2014) have found that expressing agreement with counterknowledge of the kind popular in the cultic milieu (what they call "belief in pseudoscience") also correlates with the other two, tying the knot even tighter. While these correlations are hardly surprising given the cultic milieu model, an explanation of why they tend to come together should also look at the shared cognitive characteristics that appear to underpin and sustain these types of beliefs. Starting with the correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and paranormal phenomena, we may note that both tend to (over-)attribute hidden, intentional agency, whether human or supernatural, when explaining events. Research into conspiracy psychology so far confirms that those who score higher on measures of conspiracy belief are also more prone to hyperactive agency detection and intentionality bias (Douglas *et al.* 2016; Brotherton and French 2015). Another factor noted by Wood and Douglas is holistic (as opposed to analytic) thinking: the tendency to focus on patterns in the 'big picture' rather than on individual details.

Analytic thinking style is negatively correlated with conspiracy belief, whereas holistic thinking is positively related (see, for instance, Swami *et al.* 2014).[13] Holistic thinking seems also, again as noted by Wood and Douglas, to be related to *religious* belief more generally. While this particular measure has not, to our knowledge, been replicated in a cultic milieu population, we do have specific investigations of styles of thinking in this context in a series of studies by Miguel Farias and colleagues (see discussion in Farias and Granqvist 2006). They have found that people involved with New Age ideas and practices generally score higher on measures of magical ideation, cognitive looseness, thin boundaries, and schizotypal personality than others.[14] Moreover, Farias *et al.* (2005) failed to find a connection between these traits and traditional religiosity, thus pointing to a cocktail of traits that more reliably steers an orientation toward the cultic milieu in particular.

Schizotypy is now generally considered as a spectrum with a graded tendency towards dissociation, unusual, often 'paranormal' experience, cognitive disorganisation, magical thinking, and asocial and nonconformative behaviour (see, for example, Claridge 1997). While the far end of the continuum is related to psychosis and other pathologies there is a wide range within what is considered normal and healthy, which is, again, positively related to paranormal belief, paranormal experiences, and conspiracy belief (for example, Darwin *et al.* 2011). A recent investigation by Kevin Barron *et al.* into the subscales of schizotypy, found that "Odd Beliefs or Magical Thinking (OBMT) emerged as the strongest predictor of conspiracist ideation" (Barron *et al.* 2014: 158). While this result *could* point to cognitive looseness and holistic thinking as a common factor of conspiratorial and esoteric ideation *as such* (compare Farias and Granqvist 2006: 130), Viren Swami *et al.* (2011) hypothesise that the finding could (also) be connected to social marginalisation, and to a "common thinking style" related to the (motivated) rejection of "official mechanisms of

13 However, Kahan's argument (for instance Kahan 2013) means that due to the expressive utility of identity-protective, motivated reasoning, we should expect highly invested cultic milieu members with an analytical thinking style to be *better* at picking data and arguments for their beliefs, including conspiracy theory, than more peripherally invested, intuitive, and holistic thinkers. This could, but need not, translate into a difference between the more careful parts of the conspiracy entrepreneurs and the consumers of their products.

14 In this context, New Age refers roughly to Hanegraaff's "broad sense," that is, a set of representative beliefs and practices in the contemporary cultic milieu. This is to be distinguished from New Age in the "strict sense," which refers to a set of explicitly millennialist movements organised around the belief in an imminent transformation of society, humanity, and the whole world (on this distinction, see Hanegraaff 1996).

information-generation and expert opinion" (2011: 454), an argument repeated by Barron *et al.* (2014: 158).

The latter interpretation leads us straight back into the argument about historical, sociological, and discursive dimensions of the cultic milieu as a common playing field for conspiratorial and esoteric ideas, but it also points towards another psychological aspect, namely, the construct 'conspiracy mentality'. Perhaps the most robust finding in psychological literature on conspiracy belief is that belief in one conspiracy theory predicts belief in others (Bruder *et al.* 2013), including fictional ones (Swami *et al.* 2011). "Conspiracy mentality" is designed to pick out this "general propensity to endorse conspiracy beliefs" (Imhoff and Bruder 2014: 25). It seems to be measured reliably by questionnaires (see Bruder *et al.* 2013; for a single-item version, Lantian *et al.* 2016) that seek to uncover general, conspiracy related attitudes. Research on conspiracy mentality also seems to support Swami *et al.*'s (2011) hypothesis with regard to the *direction* of conspiratorial suspicion. Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder found clear evidence that conspiracy mentality, unlike measures of right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, displays a "unique relation … to distrust against high-power groups" (2014: 36). Distrust of what is seen as the Establishment is thus a common element of both the cultic milieu and generalised conspiracism as measured by the conspiracy mentality questionnaire. Moreover, conspiratorial suspicions against perceived high-power groups may be activated by, for instance, "a precarious and insecure professional life" (Imhoff 2015: 134). This is easily exemplified by the economy of alternative practices in the cultic milieu, especially in field such as health and nutrition, where providers compete openly with established economic actors and state regulators. In the domain of the cultic milieu, the direction and intensity of distrust may be made even easier by another relevant individual difference factor documented in a New Age population: "thin boundaries" (Farias and Granqvist 2006).

Thin boundaries refer to "a particular hypersensitivity and fluidity between thoughts, feelings, and states of consciousness" (Farias and Granqvist 2006: 130). As Farias and Granqvist observe, New Age practitioners tend to score higher than the general population on measures of this feature. People with thin boundaries typically "blend thoughts and feelings" (2006: 130), are easily absorbed in fantasy and tend to be emotionally hypersensitive. They are also more prone to feel a lack of social belonging, and to feel socially alienated (132). While Farias and Granqvist argue that these characteristics help make sense of ideational aspects of alternative spirituality, the social insecurities that go with thin boundaries also appear likely to increase the subjective experience of being rejected, suppressed, or ostracised by enemy outsiders.

Farias and Granqvist's broader argument is that New Age believers "possess a disposition that is characteristic of schizotypal personality" (2006: 132). In addition to thin boundaries, their sample's scores on a number of measures shows a population prone to paranormal experiences and with a high capacity for absorption; a trait that is related to suggestibility (compare Luhrmann *et al.* 2010). These tendencies appear to be supported by norms and typical course activities in the scene, and are thus a central part of the culture and economy of the cultic milieu (for example, absorption, suggestibility, and paranormal experience appear to be elements in a broad range of experiential practices, such as clairvoyance, past life regression, seeing auras, astral projection, etc.).

If all of these results hold, individual personality traits such as (positive) schizotypy, holistic thinking, magical thinking, conspiracy mentality, absorption, and thin boundaries are among the factors that make a person more likely to find parts of the cultic milieu attractive. This means that participants in alternative spiritual networks characteristic of the cultic milieu may already be slightly more prone than the general population to find a conspiratorial logic in threatening social events, and, significantly, for the *same psychological reasons* that make heterodox belief systems, unusual experiences, and esoteric practices more intuitive and plausible to them than to others. Moreover, some of these psychological characteristics can be viewed as a kind of 'talent' for specific 'skills' that are highly valued and therefore actively exercised and encouraged in specific practices in the milieu. If we assume that staying power and status (derived from accomplishment) in a certain practice is at least in part determined by individual talent (for example, such that a natural proneness to abnormal experiences and vivid mental imagery will give an advantage for excelling at practices built around contact with spiritual entities),[15] then we should also expect a progressive selection effect for certain psychological profiles among the subcultural elites of the cultic milieu. If, as we have argued, some of these psychological factors are in fact predisposing equally for conspiratorial ideation as for success at skills that are valued in the milieu (such as seeing auras, hearing angels, 'intuiting' hidden meanings), then we have another explanatory mechanism for why, given certain socio-cultural circumstances, we see a confluence of the esoteric and the conspiratorial in the milieu. It is crucial to notice that this psychological explanation works *together* with the socio-cultural explanation derived from the cultic milieu model itself, especially due to the importance of identity, social acceptance, and motivated reasoning. When experiencing a lack of social acceptance (or even worse,

15 Practices centred on visualisation are, at present, model cases for this kind of argument: see especially Luhrmann *et al.* 2010; Asprem 2017.

sceptical criticism) of beliefs and practices, the increased tendency to blend thoughts and feelings ('thin boundaries') would assist the process of motivated reasoning even more strongly than in other cases of threatened identity.

9 Conclusion

Why do we see a convergence of esotericism and conspiracy theories? We have described a complex model where a historical process of exclusionary politics (primarily) in the domain of religion has created a socio-cultural niche (the cultic milieu) characterised by varying degrees of perceived deviance, and a psychological process that creates a selective advantage for certain personality traits in the milieu together produce elective affinities between esoteric and conspiracist ideas. There are two noteworthy aspects to the relationship between the historical exclusion process and the psychological selection process: on the one hand, the religious representations that have been pushed into the margins are of a type that seem to favour certain personality traits such as holistic thinking, absorption, and (possibly) positive schizotypy; on the other hand, once these representations and practices are shared in a social milieu built on a notion of shared deviance, new socio-psychological selection biases come into place whereby *any* proclivity toward 'odd' beliefs, ideations, and experiences makes one more likely to seek out or end up forging relations in the cultic milieu. The syncretism of deviant knowledge claims means that religious, scientific, and political elements already tend to be forged together in one big melting pot.

The psychological and historical factors thus come together in the sociological description of the cultic milieu, which, we have argued, is also where we find a set of proximate causes for the blending of conspiratorial narratives with esoteric ideations. These, we have argued, are particularly linked to practices concerning social identity. In the parlance of religious studies, conspiracy theory serves as theodicy, explanation of the persistence of evil, and the failure of one's own missions. The language of psychology tells us more about how this happens: motivated cognition drives reasoning towards partisan conclusions when agents are faced with troubling, destabilising information. Increased anthropomorphism and agency ascriptions combine with a greater tendency to ascribe intentions as the causes of events. Thin(ner) boundaries on the individual level can drive hostile reactions to disruptive information, and can combine with the attribution of high entitativity and (sinister) collective intentions to out-group members, making conspiracy a preferred explanation. Adopting such positions can, moreover, be expressively rational at the individual level, as a signal of in-group solidarity.

None of this is yet at the level of conscious strategy, but it is clear that we also need to include deliberate, intentional action in the overall picture: some actors do calculate possible effects of rhetorical tropes and claims-making styles on their particular interests. Conspiracism serves as an explanation of one's own deviant status and failure to convince the world of the hidden truth, but it can also be a political tool of mobilisation serving causes by delegitimising the perceived opposition. It can be used to interpret identity and to change society: the marginal minority of today is the cutting-edge cadre of tomorrow. We have argued, along the lines of Robertson (2016), that this is especially important to the current shape of the esotericism-conspiracy theory nexus: with discursive traditions and divisions leaning on contested 'counter-epistemic' claims, counterknowledge binds the discourses together and becomes a central concern that drives conspiracy theory. On the one hand, grand, apocalyptic conspirituality is both cosmic and globally political in its concerns, invoking the secret chiefs and black brotherhoods behind social structures and troubling events. On the other, smaller, epistemic concerns in everyday life involving socially embedded identity, livelihood, and subcultural values serve up lines of conflict closer to everyday social interaction. These two levels are tied together through the tropes and cognitive strategies of esoteric discourse, and generate a particular flavour of conspiracism that can, as shown by other authors in this book, easily be wedded to and mobilised by bigger concerns such as nationalism.

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CHAPTER 10

The Counter-Elite: Strategies of Authority in Millennial Conspiracism

David G. Robertson

1 Introduction

Think for yourself.
Do your research.
Open your mind.

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As with certain forms of popular, non-institutionalised religion (New Age being the paradigmatic example), it is common for those writing about the conspiracist milieu to note a lack of formal structure. Such acephalic networks, it is claimed, are based in self-authority, and this is reflected in their frequent rejection of authority or institutionalisation (Heelas 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2004; Hanegraaff 1996; York 1995; Fergusson 1992). It is true that it is common for prominent figures in these milieux to reject formal leadership roles or authoritative titles, yet any impartial critical analysis of the field must acknowledge that emic appeals to individualism do not mean that said individuals are in fact free of social forces. Indeed, the growth of individualism as an ideal is itself the result of wider cultural and societal forces, including a capitalist economy and neo-liberal ideology.

In fact, it is clear that certain figures do function as authorities within the field of conspiracism. Individuals such as Alex Jones and David Icke (to take just two examples) have commanded large, international audiences for over twenty years. They, and others like them, can be observed to function as 'gatekeepers', validating and popularising ideas and individuals within the millennial conspiracist milieu, as well as synthesising the work of others into larger narratives. Olav Hammer refers to such an individual as a *spokesperson*, and identifies their importance as being to "perform a novel exegesis of the discourse, more or less subtly modify the received doctrines and rituals and then propagate them as authentic teachings" (2001: 36–37).

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Regardless of an institutionalised mandate, "to be in authority is to have (or take) the right to speak" (Hammer 2001: 37). In a field where the hermeneutic of suspicion is taken to its extreme, the question of how such authority is gained and maintained demands serious attention. Appeals to individual authority notwithstanding, as Roy Wallis (1984) noted, charisma is not an innate individual quality, but a negotiated social relationship. Charisma is created in the interactions between leader and followers, in a 'system of exchanges'. Significantly, this flows hierarchically: certain followers are given special attention by the leader, and these then mediate between them and the larger, less-invested audience, in turn imbuing the leader with greater authority. Of course, these individuals are deeply invested in the leader, so have a vested interest in maintaining the impression of the leader as authoritative.

This chapter considers the issues surrounding the construction of (socially mandated) authority in the (allegedly) individualistic milieu of conspiracism, and attempts to address several specific questions. These are: how can we conceptualise authority in non-institutionalised counter-cultural milieux such as conspiracism? How does an individual gain authority in a field in which power is demonised and autonomy fetishised? Trusting no-one, why trust anyone? What, if anything, can a better understanding of such strategies in the conspiracist milieu tell us about other contemporary religious formations, such as New Age or so-called Invented Religions—and vise versa?

Drawing on Max Weber's (1964) concept of 'charisma', Matthew Wood's (2007) description of multiple and relative "non-formative" authorities, and my own model of "epistemic capital" (Robertson 2016), I will argue that in this field authority is accumulated through a strategic mobilisation of a range of both mainstream and alternative sources of knowledge, drawing from traditional, scientific, channelled, experiential, and synthetic *epistemic strategies*. It is important to note that we do not see a rejection of science as an epistemic authority as such, but rather an appeal to a larger range of epistemic sources than is acknowledged by academic and governmental institutions, and to a significant degree, social norms. By presenting this broadened spectrum—and importantly, negotiating between the different strategies—Jones, Icke, and others thereby construct themselves as a 'counter-elite', the possessors of exclusive knowledge unobtainable through mainstream epistemic strategies. I argue that this mechanism of establishing authority through epistemic capital suggests a structural similarity that helps to explain the apparent relationship between conspiracism and certain forms of contemporary religion.

The chapter focuses on those conspiracy theories that also engage with millennial narratives, Christian or otherwise. Using Alex Jones and David Icke as case studies enables me to show similar strategies at work across a

broad spectrum of the conspiracist milieu. Jones is based in the USA, has a firmly Christian perspective and audience, and is politically right wing, with connections to the John Birch Society, the Libertarian, and Tea Party movements and, despite his continuing refusal to identify with the present-day Republican Party, President Donald Trump. Icke, on the other hand, is UK-based, although he boasts a considerable audience in the USA and Australasia, is politically left wing, and was a prominent figure in the Green Party in the 1990s, even being described as "the Greens' Tony Blair" (Taylor 1997). He is highly critical of religion of all kinds; nevertheless, his present thinking has developed from a Theosophical and millennial New Age lineage (Robertson 2013, 2016). Both, however, mix millennialism with large-scale conspiracy narratives of the type that Michael Barkun describes as "systemic"—that is, "with broad goals, usually conceived as securing control over a country … or the world" (2003: 6). Furthermore, they share significant common terminology, despite their differences, including "global awakening" (that ever larger numbers are seeing through the manipulations of media and other institutions), "problem-reaction-solution" (how governments move their agendas on by creating false problems and then proffering their plan as a solution) and "sheeple" (the acquiescent masses who have yet to 'wake up'). Moreover, as we shall see, the mechanisms through which they establish authority are identical.

2 The Structure of Millennial Conspiracism

Millennial conspiracism can be understood simply as the discursive field (that is, all public appearances of these ideas, in print, speech or other media, whether popular or elite, and including all competing versions) where millennial ideas are found together with conspiracist narratives. I am here using 'millennial' to refer to all accounts of more-or-less immanent planetary change, whether for better or for worse. My use of 'conspiracism' is borrowed from Michael Barkun (2003), who uses it to differentiate between specific 'conspiracy beliefs' and the position that conspiracy is a primary motivating factor behind history, typically notions of an occulted 'hidden hand' operating behind the scenes of history for some specific end, usually presented as malevolent, although it needs to be remembered that malevolence is socially constructed, so one group's malevolence may be another group's beneficence (2003: 3). These are obviously highly simplified definitions, and I would direct readers who seek more clarification to my earlier work, where these are discussed at some length (for instance Robertson 2016). My intention with referring to millennial conspiracism is not to

reify a new category, but rather, as per the building block method (see Asprem, Dyrendal, and Robertson, this volume), to avoid the terminological vagueness of categories such as 'religion', 'New Age', and so on.

Millennial conspiracism is constituted through small networks, sometimes in a particular geographical area (often a handful of friends, sometimes consolidating into more formal discussion groups or other kinds of meetings) but more often on the Internet, into which individuals are drawn through personal involvement with books, podcasts, YouTube channels, web forums, and social media pages, as well as (in the USA particularly) local radio and public-access television stations. As with many forms of popular new religion, these groups will consist of a relatively small number of committed members and a larger periphery of those approaching or retreating from the group, and probably a few who observe but never become actively involved. This may be particularly the case in millennial conspiracism, as the range of topics open for discussion—typically including paranormal/supernatural topics, the occult, alternative health, metaphysics, conspiracy, and millennialism—is so broad that many involved will have little in common with other members. Particular writers, speakers, and broadcasters act as spokespersons; focal points rather than *de jure* leaders with an official mandate. These smaller groups are combined into a larger milieu through members' involvement with these prominent figures, through websites, social media, and in some cases, large public events. A little over six thousand people attended David Icke's events at Wembley Arena in 2012 and 2015, and Alex Jones' annual protests outside the Bilderberg group meetings attract significant crowds. These are relatively rare occurrences, however, and are not seen as necessary for engagement with the milieu.

In many areas of the millennial conspiracist milieu—though by no means all—we find a rejection of religion, and in almost every case, it is the institutional aspects of religion that are singled out for criticism. Very frequently, the term *spirituality* is used in preference, although there is little agreement in what the term refers to. It is almost always used in contradistinction with religion, and generally signifies the experiential and/or individual aspects over the institutional and/or doctrinal. Even in the more religiously conservative US examples, there is a strongly Protestant thrust to the discourse.

A rejection of hierarchical organisation is frequently noted as being a feature of the New Age field (Hanegraaff 1996: 351; Sutcliffe 2003: 12, 224–225). Melton identifies *self*-transformation specifically as a defining feature, which interestingly combines a millennial narrative of transformation with a narrative of individualism (1992: 18–19). Of course, as noted above, the *appeal* to individualism does not equate to individualism in fact, something previous studies of both New Age and conspiracism have tended to ignore. The various

attempts to establish structure in New Age parallel and prefigure the problems in attempts to model the structure of the conspiracist milieu. Both lack institutions or official leaders, formal creeds or proscribed rituals. The fact that this set of criteria is drawn from a Protestant Christian model of religion is not coincidental, which I will return to in my conclusion. The absence of these factors is not generally considered to be of central importance outside of the sphere of 'religion'; one might, for example, point out that the feminist movement lacked these features, yet the reality of its effect on society would be difficult to deny.

None of the early studies that portray New Age as a movement convincingly identify what the core feature or features of the movement is. The nearest we get are vague notions of 'immanent planetary transformation'—perhaps typical of the early post-Theosophical millennial milieu but hardly of its later "idiom of humanistic potential and therapeutic change" (Sutcliffe 2003: 10), or alternatively of 'self-authority', as discussed above. Hanegraaff (1996) sought to conceptualise New Age as a "commodified" version of Western Esotericism (1996: 515), but his four-fold definition includes "healing and growth" and "channelling," which are by no means unique to New Age, and he also includes all forms of Neopaganism, despite their high degree of institutionalisation and clearly defined practice. However, he goes on to identify esotericism and New Age as examples of a marginalised third epistemological current in Western cultural history, which he identifies as "gnosis." Gnosis, Hanegraaff claims, is neither *faith* (transcendent in source and requiring trust in institutions) nor *reason* (accessed through reason and senses and accessible to all), but a transformational personal revelation (1996: 519). While I think the tripartite distinction is over-simplistic, the focus on multiple and competing epistemic structures will be significant later.

Dyrendal has more convincingly argued for understanding contemporary conspiracism as a contemporary form of esoteric discourse, and to show "the parallel ways in which knowledge, history, and agency are constructed" in conspiracism and esotericism (2013: 224). To do this, he compares conspiracism to esotericism using Faivre's influential four-point definition: that a complex of correspondences forms an underlying structure of reality; that all life is interconnected; that by using ritual, meditation, or symbolism, human minds can access extra-mundane levels of being; and that individuals, and indeed, groups and even planetary bodies can experience ontological transformations (Faivre 1994: 119–120). In both conspiracism and esotericism, history is constructed as a war between competing groups in possession of elite, transformative knowledge (gnosis?) and a silent majority who do not possess it: the Sheeple.

An interesting suggestion for the structure of such acephalic groups is Gerlach and Hine's SPIN, or "segmented polycephalous integrated network" (1970; compare York 1995). This model suggests a network of small groups

connected primarily through ideological common purpose rather than centralised institutional structures. Gerlach and Hine add that this common purpose must be

> implementing some form of personal or social change; who are actively engaged in the recruitment of others; and whose influence is spreading in opposition to the established order within which it originated. (1970: xvi)

The conspiracist milieu seeks both personal and social change, and indeed, as in Melton's definition above, these are frequently conflated. As the cosmology is based around three parties—an oppressive conspiratorial elite, an engaged but beleaguered enlightened minority, and the much larger acquiescent and even unconscious majority[1]—it is generally argued that societal change comes first and foremost from changing oneself, by waking up from the illusions of the media and the hegemony of the controlling elite. When a 'critical mass' of awakened souls is reached—the global awakening—the balance will be tipped and society will be forced to change paradigmatically.[2] For this reason, conspiracists are always keen to recruit new people to the cause, although their open hostility to hegemonic ideology, and the reciprocal hostility engendered, means that they are fighting a difficult battle. Nevertheless, those within the milieu will often go to great lengths to challenge what they see as flawed information or argumentation that is going unchallenged in the public sphere, particularly on social media where they have the opportunity to directly challenge such ideas unlike on mainstream media where the ideas would be mockingly reported second-hand, if at all.

To this degree, we might very well wish to see the conspiracist milieu as an example of a SPIN. However, the examples Gerlach and Hine give—Pentecostalism and the Black Power movement—have much more clearly definable aims in mind than conspiracism, which is typically taken to include a vast array of counter-hegemonic ideas from anti-war protests and anti-corporate power on one hand to white nationalism and anti-vaccine narratives on the other. It is hard, therefore, to see conspiracism then as a SPIN united by a common ideological aim, despite the other structural similarities.

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1 This tripartite division of society into the enlightened, the aware but corrupt, and the unconscious majority is often considered a defining feature of Gnosticism. It is encountered in a number of New Religious Movements, including the Nation of Islam and the Fourth Way groups based on the teaching of G.I. Gurdjieff.

2 This model enables writers such as Icke and Jones to engage in conspiratorial apocalypticism while at the same time ascribing to a more utopian millennialism. The night is darkest before the dawn, if you will. I describe this dialectical millennialism in more detail in Robertson 2016.

2.1 *Non-Formative Authority*

Another alternative to a model of religious authority based on institutions is that presented by Matthew Wood in *Power, Possession and the New Age* (2007), in which he constructs the 'New Age' field as a *non-formative network*. Non-formative here indicates that authorities in the field are unable to "shape people's and organisations' subjective identities and habitus" in a structured way (Wood 2007: 243). Developing Bourdieu's model of fields, Wood posits a spectrum of religious authority from the non-formativeness of New Age through somewhat more formative groups such as Spiritualism or Wicca, in which authorities are better able to "shape experiences and identities," up to fully formative religious institutions who are able to act formatively on communities at a national level (11).

By recognising "multiple and relative" authorities in the New Age milieu, Wood's model offers a welcome recognition that claims to self-authority are part of the field, but are by no means the full story. However, in ascribing formative authority to certain institutions, Wood oversimplifies the situation. While the leaders of religious organisations such as the Catholic Church would like it to be the case that their mandates carry such formative authority, this ignores the situation on the ground. Divorce is no less common in predominantly Catholic cities, and Poland has a high degree of heterodox belief and folk customs, despite the highest rate of identification with the Catholic Church in Europe. Much of what Wood identifies as formative authority then is in fact lip service; formally identifying as abrogating to an authority is not the same as doing so in practice. Meanwhile, there are certainly shared assumptions and practices in the New Age and conspiracist milieux that could suggest a degree of formativeness.

I would further disagree with Wood's conclusion that non-formative networks are typified by a *lack* of competition or habitus; that in non-formative fields, individuals "play the game of the field" to a lesser degree (Wood 2007: 71–72). Wood specifically states that tussles "for religious capital with one another that [involve] defenses and accusations regarding legitimacy" are a feature of formative fields (2007: 73). As we shall see, although authorities are multiple and relative, some nevertheless possess greater authority than others, and although often *sub rosa,* there is a great deal of competing for position within the field between figures such as Icke or Jones with a higher degree of authority, as well as within their subscribers. As with the systems Wood identifies as formative authority, the apparent non-formativeness of these networks is in fact an *appeal* to non-formativeness, rather than actual non-formativeness.

2.2 *Two Conspiracist Authority Figures*

The subjects of my case studies are certainly regarded as authoritative figures by many of their subscribers, and clearly exert a degree of power over them.

As I will show, except for the degree to which they can be considered "religious" (a debate that is of no importance here), both perfectly fit the spokesperson type as described by Hammer: their biographies are presented according to the rules of hagiography; their works are disseminated and taken as broadly authoritative in the milieu; their ideas are further elaborated upon by others, making them the point of departure in the development of new positions (Hammer 2001: 37).

David Icke has to date published 21 books since 1990, and can sell thousands of tickets for speaking events lasting upwards of ten hours, with events that took place in 2017 in the UK, Iceland, Sweden, Ireland, Canada, France, and Slovenia. His website ranks in the top 2,600 in the UK and USA, considerably higher than many more traditional media outlets. While he and his infamous 'reptilian thesis'—that the Illuminati, who rule the world in secret, are at their centre a race of shape-shifting reptilian extraterrestrials (Robertson 2013)—are frequently mocked in the media, particularly in the UK, a Pew Forum survey in 2014 suggested that some 4 per cent of the US population agreed with the statement "'lizard people' control our societies by gaining political power" (Williams 2013).

Alex Jones, once described by *Rolling Stone* magazine as "the world's most influential conspiracy theorist" (Zaitchik 2011), reaches a huge audience through his syndicated weekday radio show and podcast (it is difficult to establish listening figures with great accuracy, but they certainly number in the hundreds of thousands daily). For many years, Jones had a parallel career as a documentary filmmaker, with some success, particularly with *The Obama Deception* (2009), which was timed to come out with Barack Obama's election to the presidency of the USA. Jones is clearly enamoured with celebrity; as well as courting guests from the entertainment industry, including musicians Ted Nugent, Willie Nelson, and Billy Corgan, and actors Sean Young, Viggo Mortensen, and Charlie Sheen (whose infamous "tiger blood" meltdown/breakdown started on Jones' show), Jones has had cameos in Richard Linklater's films *Waking life* and *A Scanner Darkly*, in both of which he tellingly plays a street preacher. But Jones' influence on popular political discourse runs deeper than this; current and former politicians Ron and Rand Paul, Jesse Ventura, and more recently (now President) Donald Trump have all appeared on his show. Not only did Jones interview Trump twice during his presidential campaign, but Trump phoned Jones personally on the day of his election, and Jones was present at the inauguration. Indeed, US newspapers are now starting to notice that much of Trump's rhetoric is highly reminiscent of Jones' broadcasts, both in style and content. This puts Jones in an odd position vis-a-vis state power, an idea we will return to later.

3 Authority in the Millennial Conspiracist Milieu

Charisma, as conceptualised by German proto-sociologist Max Weber, is a quality or attribute that gives a person "specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (1964: 358). In attempting to classify religions according to their institutional structures, he identified three forms of authority: legal (or bureaucratic), traditional, and charismatic. The first two have much in common, inasmuch as they are relatively stable, impersonal, rational, and 'worldly'. Charismatic authority, however, is described as personal, irrational, and unstable (Adair-Toteff 2005:191). On the breakdown of charismatic authority due to the leader's death or disgrace, the group establishes either traditional authority (in which a successor takes over the former leader's position, often following a power struggle) or bureaucratic authority (in which institutions and regulations 'routinise' and codify the leader's teachings). Alternatively, they may simply collapse.

The charismatic person is "specifically extraordinary," and their followers are devoted to them personally (Weber 1964: 140). This devotion, in Weber's description, is produced as a result of the leader's heroic acts or 'miracles' (1964: 140, 656). In Weber's terms, these magical acts establish that the charismatic leader has been chosen by god:

> a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual is treated as a leader. (1964: 328)

It is important to note, however, that Weber's charismatic person does not passively gain authority, but specifically *claims* leadership. This is significant, because although both Jones and Icke are prominent figures, neither presents themselves as a leader—explicitly, at least. Indeed, such formal authority is explicitly rejected by both. However, a second aspect to Weber's formulation is that the leader's charisma must be recognised in turn by others. As Bromley notes, these followers "may also advance those claims on behalf of the leader" (2014: 104).

Indeed, this is what we see happening. Although both Icke and Jones formally deny leadership, they nevertheless go to considerable lengths to establish the miraculous abilities with which their followers can make their leadership claims for them. Specifically, both Jones and Icke present themselves as prophets, pointing to previous successful predictions to bolster their authority, although neither would use the term explicitly. The following transcript is from

the July 25, 2001 broadcast of the Alex Jones show, which Jones and his supporters frequently cite as an example of Jones' successful prophesying:

> America is the shining jewel the globalists want to bring down, and they will use terrorism as the pretext to get it done … Call the White House, tell them we know the government's planning terrorism, we know Oklahoma City and the Trade Center were terrorism, we know the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted to blow up airliners … If you do it, we're going to blame you, 'cos we know who's up to it. Or if you let some terrorist group do it, like the World Trade Centre, we'll know who to blame.[3]

Here, Jones suggests that there will be an immanent (though not date-specific) 'false-flag' attack (that is, one carried out by one power under the guise of another) on the USA, to be blamed on Osama Bin Laden, which may involve blowing up planes. Jones does not, however, predict that it will involve the World Trade Center, however, but mentions it as an example of a previous false-flag attack, specifically the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Three months later, a series of attacks did happen for which Bin Laden was blamed, but that is the extent to which Jones can be said to have been correct. No timescale was given by Jones. No planes were blown up. In fact, Jones' prophecy was a failure unless one already considers the 9/11 attacks to have been a false-flag operation, and therefore it is a logical fallacy to use this prediction as evidence that 9/11 was a false-flag attack, as Jones and his supporters frequently do. According to the authoritative account, and the majority of Americans, Osama bin Laden ordered the 9/11 attacks, in direct contradiction to Jones' statement.

Furthermore, it needs to be noted that Jones is actually urging his listeners to call the White House in order to prevent the prophesied attack from happening. If no attack had happened, then Jones could still claim to have been correct. In other words, the reason given for why the prediction didn't pan out would be that its accuracy enabled the group to divert it before it occurred, a common strategy for avoiding cognitive dissonance, sometimes referred to as 'prevention' (Robertson 2016: 8).

Jones has not tended to suggest a supernatural source for his prophesying; rather, he is the type of prophet who, according to Barkun's typology, "reads the signs of the times" (2013: 17). In my own epistemic typology, I would refer to Jones as accumulating *synthetic knowledge*, that is, knowledge that is produced through connecting disparate and often circumstantial items together to produce a bigger picture. He does refer to his 'intuition' or 'gut feeling' on occasion,

3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_foQofbDnQ. Accessed 19/12/2011.

but again, with the caveat that he has been doing what he does for so long that he has begun to understand how 'they' think. Recently, however, Jones has been more openly acknowledging his Christianity, and along with it, suggesting that Infowars (and the presidency of Donald Trump) is part of God's plan. Perhaps in times of increased political turmoil and semiotic arousal (Landes 2011), Jones feels he can (or must) lay his cards more clearly on the table.

Icke, on the other hand, does claim direct supernatural mandate, openly and frequently, although the exact nature of that mandate has changed significantly over time. Until mid 1993, he claimed his authority came entirely from highly evolved supernatural beings, whose origin was unclear but who had responsibility for the solar system, at least. Such beings were known as Masters or Mahatmas in the Theosophical tradition, and were initially conceived of as highly developed humans, though the idea had developed to include extraterrestrials by the early twentieth century. Icke's Masters (who he called, in characteristically populist style, "the Guys") included Jesus (or at least, his cosmic aspect, "the Christ Spirit"), Lao Tzu, Socrates, and Rakoczi,[4] a figure identified in the writings of Alice Bailey as "Lord of Civilisation," charged with establishing the "Age of Aquarius" (1972 [1944]: 232; 1957: 667).

These messages came first through channelers including Betty Shine, Deborah Shaw, and Derek Acorah (well known to the British public through ITV's *Most Haunted* series).[5] The earliest of them seem to paint Icke not so much as a prophet, but rather a spiritual saviour figure being predicted by these channelled entities. This may have been the impetus behind Icke's well-known (and frequently mocked) statement that he was "the son of God" during a BBC television interview with Terry Wogan in 1991.

From 1993, however, Icke claimed to have direct communication with the Masters, manifesting initially in a stone circle in Peru, and following an Ayahuasca trip in Brazil in 2003, with the Godhead itself. This is perhaps unsurprising; as Bromley notes, charismatic figures who present themselves as divine need to maintain significantly higher levels of charisma, and the groups that form around them tend to be tightly structured and highly controlled (2014: 105–106), for example Aum Shinrikyo or Heaven's Gate. Icke has always sought a wide audience, however, as shown by his frequent public talks, media appearances, and publishing output. However, Icke may also have wanted to

4 Alternatively "Rakorzy" (Icke 1991: 73), "Racorzy" (1991: 74) or "Rakorski" (1992: 31).

5 On *Most Haunted*, Acorah would allegedly channel spirits who were haunting buildings. In 2005, a number of newspapers ran stories claiming that he had actually been fed the information by the show's producers, with a number of the names he had channelled being accusations of fakery in anagram form (Nevin 2005).

claim this epistemic capital for himself due to his frequent fallings-out with his channelers, most significantly Deborah Shaw. Most of Icke's 1992 book *Love Changes Everything* was channelled by Shaw, who had moved in with Icke and his family, and with whom Icke fathered a daughter. Today, Icke has no contact with Shaw or their daughter, and *Love Changes Everything* (a work heavily influenced by Theosophical ideas) remains out of print and is seldom acknowledged in his later work.

However, like Jones, Icke is also a 'synthetic' prophet, frequently styling himself "the dot connector." Icke makes frequent claims that contemporary news stories were predicted in his books; two recent examples are that he publicly named Jimmy Savile and Edward Heath (both now dead) as paedophiles long before the claims came to public attention in Operation Yewtree from 2012. Closer inspection once again reveals that these prophecies are not quite the successes they purport to be. Edward Heath was implicated in several investigations while alive, though he was never charged. It has recently emerged that these accusations were based entirely on eye-witness testimony that can be shown to be at best in contradiction with the historical record, and at worst entirely fabricated. Similarly to the Satanic Ritual Abuse cases of the 1990s, such testimony is often produced using now-discredited hypnotic memory regression techniques, and frequently amplified by selective reporting by the press. On the other hand, Savile has been acknowledged as one of the UK's worst sex offenders by the police post-mortem, but despite Icke's frequent claims to the contrary, Icke only named Savile after his death, and significantly, after an ITV documentary that exposed Savile as a serial paedophile on October 3, 2012 (ITV 2012). Not one accusation against Savile can be found in his books or videos prior to this date.[6]

Questions of legitimacy aside, in both cases, these appeals to successful prophecies are part of a conscious program to gain authority. Both Icke and Jones have made many more failed predictions than successful ones, but using a technique I call "rolling prophecy," their success rate can be exaggerated (Robertson 2013). Rolling prophecy requires a regular and frequent output of prophetic material, enabling a process of constant reconsideration and selection. Failures will be forgotten, whereas apparently successful prophecies are emphasised. I say *apparently* successful as there will typically be some massaging to make them seem more successful than they actually are, as demonstrated above by Jones' self-proclaimed prediction of 9/11 or Icke's identification of Saville. Icke continues to mention the channelled messages from Rakoczi, including at his live events throughout 2015 and 2016, but significantly these later references omit the failed prophecies detailed in earlier works, including

6 If any reader can point one out to me, I will be most grateful.

widespread earthquakes and the eruption of Washington's Mount Rainier in 1991. So, rolling prophecy has allowed both Icke and Jones to minimise their failures and amplify the successes, creating the impression of themselves as much more successful prophets than in reality, and therefore creating charismatic authority.

3.1 *The Internet and Authority*

How well, then, then do these charismatic strategies function in the Web 2.0 era? As Erica Baffelli notes, the Internet offers new possibilities for "the role and perception of authority" (2011: 119). Indeed, the oft-noted distinction between *religion online* (in which traditional hierarchical structures are reproduced in an electronic form) and *online religion* (with a high level of interactivity and more open structures) mirrors the apparent distinction between institutionalised or traditional religions and the more loosely structured milieu of new religions (Helland 2000). But there are differences; how, for example, would charismatic leadership emerge in an environment that lacked any physical relationship?

It may be that use of the Internet makes rolling prophecy a more viable strategy than in previous decades. Multiple posts may be produced daily—and unlike traditional journalism, with no serious editorial oversight—yet all remain accessible should any turn out to have been correct, and moreover can be edited should details turn out to have been inaccurate. Significantly, these articles, images, and videos can then be instantly shared via social media, potentially giving them a broader audience than they originally had as they are removed from their original context.

It is often claimed that the use of the Internet, particularly social media in the Web 2.0 era, breaks down the traditional separation between producer and consumer; in this case, between religious leader and religious convert. In her work on Japanese new religions, however, Baffelli suggests that the Internet can actually enhance the leader's image as "untouchable, distant and above all charismatic" (2011: 127). By moving to predominantly online interaction, the leader (or their subordinates) is better able to control their image, and rather than humanise them, actually minimise the exposure of their problematically human bodies and emotions. The leader in effect becomes "perfect, immaterial, semi-divine, only occasionally manifesting … in a material sense" (2011: 128). The Internet therefore can actually strengthen the charisma of the leader by enhancing the 'magical' qualities, while limiting the possibility of risk of personal interaction and public appearances by placing the leader at one step removed from their followers. They are more available in terms of time, while being less available as a material body. Such online authority may, ironically, strengthen the ability for the charismatic persona of the leader to be

maintained while appearing to do quite the opposite. Despite seeming on the surface very different, then, the Internet is in fact a powerful tool for enabling traditional charismatic structures to be maintained.

Icke and Jones both demonstrate this. Although Jones' call-in shows claim unvetted "open phones," one does not have to listen for too long before hearing him literally screaming at a caller who dares to criticise him. A clear example was his appearance on the BBC's magazine show Sunday Politics, hosted by Andrew Neil, to discuss the Bilderberg Group, who were meeting in the UK that week. His response to the mocking interview is to talk over the presenter and other guest, and the show fades out with Jones screaming "Liberty is rising! You will not stop the Republic! Humanity is awakening!"[7]

A tight reign is also kept on Icke's online forums by his staff. Although there is a great deal of stress put on free speech, those repeatedly criticising Icke are frequently removed. To be fair, Sean Adl-Tabatabai, Icke's former webmaster and later co-organiser of his failed Internet TV channel, *The People's Voice*, seems to have been responsible for this censorship. That the relationship between the two became highly rancorous and even litigious does not seem to have dissuaded Icke's critics, however. Given the situation, replacing Adl-Tabatabai as moderator with his son Gareth was unlikely to be seen in a positive light.

4 "Cointel Shills": Competing for Capital

Using Icke and Jones as case studies make plain the difference between the predominantly right wing and Christian conspiracism of the USA and the predominantly left wing (but increasingly less so) and 'spiritual' conspiracism of the UK. It may be that the difference stems from which aspect of political discourse has been marginalised in each case. Certainly, both US libertarianism and UK socialism present utopian visions of the future, rather different language notwithstanding. However, they also allow us to see that there is indeed competition for the capital of the field, contra Wood (2007).

Icke has been highly critical of the right-wing and Christian rhetoric he encountered in conspiracist discourse during the 1990s. He is alleged to have told a Christian Patriot group, "I don't know which I dislike more, the world controlled by the Brotherhood, or the one you want to replace it with" (Barkun 2003: 108). It is certainly interesting then that he and Jones have worked together on multiple occasions.

7 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22832994. Accessed 24/03/2017.

Jones initially considered Icke a "con-man," and implied that he was a counterintelligence agent sent to discredit more sober researchers by promoting the reptilian thesis, which he referred to as the "turd in the punchbowl" (Ronson 2001). However, Jones has since apologised, and Icke was a frequent guest on Jones' syndicated radio show between 2005 and 2014. This is a clear example of both men putting their differences aside to capitalise on the authority of the other in somewhat different circles.

Jones stayed silent when Icke publicly fell out with a frequent Infowars guest, Jesse Ventura, former Governor of Minnesota, in 2011. Icke was interviewed for Ventura's cable show, *Conspiracy Theory* (co-produced by Jones), but was unhappy about the tone of the questioning, during which Ventura implied, predictably, that Icke was "in it for the money," and the eventual edit used, which Icke thought made it appear that he was avoiding answering. Icke later called Ventura "one of the most monumental egos and uninformed people it has been my 'experience' to encounter," and "one of the most arrogant and ignorant men I can ever remember looking in the eyes" (Icke 2011).

Icke has similarly remained silent on Jones' open support for Donald Trump, although he has been highly critical of Trump himself, and of any attempt to affect change through the political system. Nevertheless, his frequent collaborator Richie Allen (whose daily radio show/podcast is sponsored and hosted by davidicke.com) has been quite vocal in his criticism of Jones and others associated with him, such as Paul Joseph Watson. For example, on the January 4, 2017 episode, Jones is described as having become a Neocon, and is accused of producing the very partisan and Islamophobic material he formerly accused mainstream outlets such as FOX News of producing, and which Jones used to claim was part of a plan to destabilise the USA, introduce martial law, and advance globalism. Guest Kevin Barrett suggests that Jones has chosen to change his oppositional position in order to grow the profits of the Infowars operation in the Trump presidency—in other words, for money.[8] Jones has absolutely had to adapt his rhetoric given his present connections to the White House. Rather than accuse the president of being a puppet of conspiratorial powers, Infowars' criticisms of government policy now pits the president as struggling against the globalist interests of the 'deep state'—essentially civil servants and other unelected officials. This rhetoric is highly reminiscent of the anti-elitist discourse during the UK "Brexit" referendum in 2016, but this can be ignored when it doesn't suit, for example when Trump places his own unelected officials in power, or when the UK's own High Court Judges came under fire for agreeing with European judges in questioning the legality of Brexit.

8 https://youtu.be/yVKF9tQSOZ8. Accessed 24/03/2017.

The battle over capital is not only between producers, but between producers and their audience. Both Jones and Icke have been accused of being a "shill," defined by David Clarke as "someone who deliberately promotes a public impression of themselves as an independent or objective researcher while secretly pursuing a hidden agenda" (2015: 133). Conspiracist website Before It's News published a piece on August 2, 2016 claiming that Alex Jones' trip to Europe was in fact his escaping the USA, after helping the government "to spark a civil war in Texas" during the Jade Helm military exercises.[9] Jones' alleged role was to incite veterans and patriots into armed confrontation with the military and police, thereby giving the impetus for increased security measures. Jones on the other hand, claims he was in Europe to chart the collapse of the European Union and the increasing austerity measures. Blogger Timothy Fitzpatrick accuses Jones specifically of working for both COINTELPRO (the 1956–71 CIA program of counter-intelligence and propaganda) and HASBARA (the Israeli Public Diplomacy program).[10] This is also an example of a number of deeply unpleasant websites alleging Jones to be working secretly for Israel, pointing out that his ex-wife and a number of his colleagues are Jewish, using familiar anti-Semitic language and imagery.[11]

Very often, criticisms of prominent conspiracist figures revolve around financial gain. The claim that the millennial conspiracist figure is "only in it for the money" (and perhaps, by implication, a shill) is a frequent one. Jones himself is often singled out for this, not infrequently with the added implication that those funding him are Jewish. If the individual is aiming to make money, it is assumed therefore that their honesty is impugned. It is particularly interesting then that Weber states that the charismatic leader must *reject* economic gain, as it is too worldly, writing "Pure charisma is specifically *economically alien*" (1964: 142, emphasis in original). It is a strange accusation: one would not criticise a dentist or baker for wanting to put a roof over their head. Somehow the conspiracist speaker must give the impression of being a wandering ascetic, holding out a bowl for alms. This may be a hangover of a Protestant Christian idea of saintliness: the charismatic figure must reject the world.

9 http://beforeitsnews.com/alternative/2015/08/alex-jones-flees-america-after-being-linked-to-obama-plot-to-spark-a-civil-war-in-texas-during-jade-helm-15-3193732.html. Accessed 2403/2017.

10 http://smoloko.com/?p=9681. Accessed 28/12/2016.

11 This ugly aspect of conspiracy discourse has always been present, although its size is often exaggerated by those who seek to marginalise conspiracy discourses. Certainly, however, anti-Semitic rhetoric becomes more apparent at times when issues of race and immigration come to the fore (see Jackson, this volume), and it is undeniable that it has become particularly visible of late, in both the USA and Europe.

More likely, however, is that conspiracist discourse is predicated upon such a fundamental rejection of societal norms that any sort of economic activity is shunned. It is also a logical result of conspiracism's *cui bono* solution to evidence for conspiracy.[12]

4.1 *Epistemic Capital*

In the conspiracist milieu, I suggest, subscribers do not see such prophesying, intuition, and dot-connecting as inherently magical, reacting with wonder. Rather, they identify with such activities, and the reaction is of recognition. In perhaps 50 per cent of cases, according to my fieldwork (2014; 2016), subscribers have experienced such phenomena for themselves, or similar anomalous experiences. The charismatic figure here is one who does acts that are seen by their audience as commonplace, yet repressed. The miraculous act may therefore not be the prophesying and so on, but the act of going public with it.

What typifies the field in this instance is that charisma is established through the accumulation of *epistemic capital*. That is, "the way in which actors within the intellectual field engage in strategies aimed at maximising … epistemic profits, that is, better knowledge of the world" (Maton 2003: 62). To put it another way, epistemic capital refers not to what or who you know, but how you know. For many, science is the epistemic standard most often appealed to, although in practice tradition and personal experience are far more drawn upon in everyday life. Yet, within the millennial conspiracist milieu, science is relativised and takes an equal standing to other less often appealed to standards. As with esotericism, experience, channelling, intuition, and synthetic (dot-connecting) knowledge are considered to be equally important.

As noted above, Icke has made frequent appeals to channelled communications with spiritual and/or extraterrestrial beings, and both he and Jones make frequent use of synthetic knowledge. Taking Icke's 2013 book *The Perception Deception* as an example, and opening at a random point, he references Leslie Gilbert in *Burke's Peerage* (269–270), former editor of *Vanity Fair* Tina Brown's book *The Diana Chronicles* (270), an unnamed and undated column from the *Independent* (271), "research by a Melbourne teacher and his senior students" (271), the *Daily Mail* (272), unsubstantiated testimony from one of the original "satanic panic" accusers, Arizona Wilder (273–276), blogger Stewart Swerdlow, and the 1998 Wesley Snipes superhero/vampire film, *Blade* (277). He does not differentiate primary from secondary sources, prioritises personal testimony without providing any supporting material evidence, and gives great authority to anything that supports his thesis while ignoring or dismissing that which

12 I am indebted to Asbjørn Dyrendal for this observation.

does not (confirmation bias). Pages 425–446 make the point that education trains people not to think; it is telling then that Icke will cite a teacher and their students as evidence when it suits his argument. Likewise, the chapters on science and the media: a *Daily Mail* column or a scientific paper is fine, so long as it agrees with Icke.

It is not the case, as is sometimes polemically claimed, that conspiracists typically reject science outright, however. In fact, many in this milieu make firm and frequent appeals to the authority of science. However, it is relativised; the scientific impossibility of interstellar travel is trumped by the experience of meeting extraterrestrials, for example. It is also used selectively: when one paper supports one of Icke's theories, it is hailed as proof, but when fifty papers suggest otherwise, they are dismissed as evidence of the close-mindedness of "mainstream science" (at best), or a conspiracy (at worst). When a guest appears on Jones' show, their scientific credentials will be played up: when the scientific majority disagrees with Jones (such as regarding climate change), we will be told that universities train people to toe the line. Epistemic capital is accumulated through the strategic mobilisation of each of these epistemic strategies, rather than an outright rejection of mainstream strategies. This makes these fields highly inclusive, varied and adaptable.

5 Conclusion

Conspiracist figureheads such as Icke and Jones gain and maintain authority through the accumulation of epistemic capital, by demonstrating their ability to access a range of exclusive sources of knowledge. It is not that they possess social capital alone—that they know something that you do not—but rather that they *can* know something you do not. They claim access to a broader range of sources of knowledge than the typical person, and this appears miraculous and gives them charisma. Prophecy through channelled, intuitive, or synthetic knowledge demonstrates that the leader has access to elite knowledge.

This approach to authority in popular movements offers a more nuanced take on the concept that both challenges the need for explicitly 'supernatural' charismatic acts on the behalf of the leader, and also helps to explain how leaders' occasional failures, both personal and in terms of prophecy, may be dismissed as relatively unimportant. The leader is not seen as divine, nor as infallible; rather, they have access to sources of information that their followers and critics do not.

As such, they are constructing themselves as a 'counter-elite': rather than an elite defined by the control of economic capital, one defined by epistemic

capital—an *epistemocracy*, perhaps. This clearly echoes Marxist critiques, but focused on the seizing of the means of knowledge production. Not only are counter-epistemic strategies the means to liberation, their suppression is the very tool by which the possibility of said liberation is restricted. The leader is seen as demonstrating the very thing their subscribers consider to be repressed by the controlling power, however they identify it. Yet the constant appeals to individualism inherently undermine any potential efforts toward institutionalisation.

As Taves and Kinsella note, it is unlikely that such organisational structures, with multiple and relativised authorities competing over the epistemic capital of the field, are anything new: rather they have "historically coexisted alongside and interpenetrated with 'official' religious organisations" (2013: 87). A potential development of the ideas in this chapter is that such dynamics are in no way confined to the sphere of religions, official or otherwise. Indeed, this model may help underline that, when stripped of their magical veneer, there is nothing exceptional about the development of religious movements. More, the model of epistemic capital might allow us to better place such groups in relation to the broader field of knowledge they are located within. Millennialism and conspiracism are both based on appeals to counter-hegemonic epistemic strategies, so while the content may differ (at least inasmuch as we tend to see one as essentially religious and the other as essentially secular), the underlying *epistemé* are the same.

Charismatic authority is particularly associated with the first generation of organisations, and with contemporary conspiracist culture dating predominantly from the late 1960s, it is unclear how it will develop through its second and third generations. Certainly, as Icke reaches his 60s and Jones is increasingly aligned with the mainstream political system than ever before, we may begin to see institutionalisation of these movements, despite the apparent lack of organisation and unabating appeals to individualisation.

Open your mind.

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PART 3

Locations

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CHAPTER 11

Buddhism Endangered by Hidden Enemies: Conspiracy Narratives in Sri Lankan Buddhist Present and Past

Sven Bretfeld

1 Introduction

Who is the puppet-master of the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict that has devastated Sri Lanka's society, economy, and political apparatus for more than 40 years? Who is the *real* beneficiary of the more recent breakout of anti-Muslim violence in the country? Once questions are formulated in this way, the answers tend to be startling. The most mind-boggling—but not infrequent—answer I encountered: the Norwegians. What interest can Norway, my home country for the last two years, have in pushing a small South Asian insular state into internal conflict and chaos? Digging into this question, one finds over-complex but wide-spread ideas of a 'Lanko-centric' globalised world secretly governed by international conspiracy networks in which hidden agents misuse world-wide power asymmetries to keep poorer countries such as Sri Lanka down on the ground. The cause of national problems, so the idea suggests itself, can be anything but genuine. Conspiracy theories are a standard feature of the public discourse in modern Sri Lanka. A Sri Lankan colleague of mine even told me recently: "Whenever Sri Lankans talk about politics, conspiracy theory is there."

Exploited by colonial powers and shaken by more than 25 years of bloody civil war, Sri Lankan society stores countless stories of devastating crises in its cultural memory. A common type of conspiracy theory connects the nuisances of the recent and middle-range past to the remote history of the island's ancient culture. This framework integrates the modern crises as the most recent episodes of a considerably complex master-narrative covering 2.5 millennia of Sinhala-Buddhist cultural memory. The resulting nationalist ideology provides an explanation for the mismatch, widely felt among the Sinhalese population, between an alleged cultural superiority of their national heritage and the marginalised position of Sri Lanka in the modern globalised world. It tells the story of a 'chosen' people—in modern nationalist wording, the Sinhalese nation—who are regarded the legal 'owner' of Sri Lanka and to have defended Buddhism

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in its 'true' and 'original' form against non-believers for more than two millennia. This motif takes on the features of a conspiracy theory whenever these 'non-believers' emerge as a *hidden enemy* manipulating the pious citizens of the country onto a path leading to the loss of their religious treasures.

A strong recent promoter of these types of conspiracy theories is the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a radical right-wing organisation consisting mainly of Buddhist monks. As its name "Buddhist Power Army" suggests, the BBS understands itself as a brigade of activists dedicated to the defence of the country's Buddhist heritage. The group has become known for its extremist attitude towards non-Buddhist religions, especially Islam. As such, it was often accused of supporting and organising violent agitation against Muslim communities, and attacks against property owned by Sri Lankan Muslims. In her study on recent Sri Lankan hate rhetoric, Haniffa (2016: 9) describes the BBS's anti-Muslim propaganda as guided by images of an international conspiracy to turn Sri Lanka into a Muslim country by the year 2040. BBS rhetoric nurtures rumours about a large jihadist army that is allegedly being trained in the Middle East, waiting for the proper time to invade the country. These fears are bundled together with sexualised stereotypes of Muslim women who are depicted as assisting the Islamic takeover by being "constantly pregnant." A third constituent of this propaganda machinery is the rage against so-called unethical conversions, with which Muslims allegedly decimate the Buddhists of Sri Lanka by forcibly converting them to Islam.

Haniffa is surely right in attributing the current anti-Muslim rhetoric to the abstract fear of the Sinhalese majority of becoming a minority in its 'own' country or of being wiped from its soil altogether. However, the ancient roots of this fear have not always been recognised. They emerge from an old narrative framework that has informed Sri Lankan Buddhist identity-politics for a long time, before it became transformed into a 'modernised', basically racist and anti-pluralist narrative template during the colonial struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Together with this modern retelling, the Othering strategies—the narrative constellations between heroes and anti-heroes—have also changed. While in the late colonial period the main enemies were identified with the British and the Christian churches, the enemy-image gradually shifted to the Tamil inhabitants of Sri Lanka during the decades following the country's independence. More recently Muslims were squeezed into the pattern. Whereas the 'enemies' are exchangeable, the narrative structure and the social appeal go back at least to the rise of Sinhalatva (Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism) in the late nineteenth century.[1] As we will

1 The term Sinhalatva was coined by Schalk (2007) in parallel to the older term Hindūtva denoting Indian Hindu nationalism.

see, there is a genealogy connecting the modern discourses of Sinhala chauvinism to the ancient Sri Lankan Buddhist historiographical tradition in which the topos of the "endangered superior culture" was first formulated. As an inter-discourse constantly propelling between recent, medium, and remote pasts, this topos fashions the imagination of "the Sinhalese" and "their Buddhism" as reified, meta-historical entities, relying on each other in a mutual protectorate relationship. This shifting of time levels contributes to the social persuasiveness of modern-day conspiracy theories by endowing them with apparent historical depth and cosmological significance.

Before we proceed to the case studies, some words on my general approach to conspiracy theories are necessary. Scholarship had long approached conspiracy theories with attention to faulty argumentative structures. Conspiracy theories, so a common presumption goes, are interpretations of reality based on "poor evidence or lack of evidence, circular reasoning, repetition of unproven premises, and false dilemmas" (Miller 2002: 41; cited in Gray 2010: 4). As a scholar of religion, however, I can hardly accept these characteristics as already sufficient requirements for a definition of conspiracy theories. Others have characterised conspiracy theories as counter-discourses challenging majority perspectives from a "disenfranchized or alienated political position" (Gray 2010: 5–6). As the Sri Lankan cases will show (and I think this is true for many others), conspiracy theories can provide a basis for official state policies, popularised by social and political elites and believed by a significant part of the population. If they are counter-discourses, this is so only when contrasted against a majority discourse outside of this society itself. For a country such as Sri Lanka, marginalised in the power plays of international markets and global politics, this is a valid hypothesis for the study of the transnational roots of a conspiracy theory. On the national level, however, the following case examples are not actually uttered from an oblique social position. Rather than counter-discourses, I would describe them as subsurface potentials, latent for a while but ready to re-emerge in moments of social crisis to be utilised with great effect and popular response.

Since argumentative quality and the position in the discursive field are insufficient to provide a stand-alone criterion for the definition of conspiracy theories, it seems best to start from the most basic meaning of the word *to conspire* which Gray gives as "a secret collaboration between people towards some wicked end" (2010: 4). A conspiracy theory, then, is the interpretation of reality or an aspect thereof as a harmful product of people secretly collaborating towards a wicked end. This is basically a narrative plot structure, evolving around a sharp, but outwardly more or less non-transparent, constellation of 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. For the study of the social implementation of conspiracy theories, we can approach them as discourses organised by this

specific plot structure. As Viehöver (2001) has suggested, an investigation of such a discourse can profit from borrowing the analytical instruments of narratology. With this approach the 'wicked end' can be called the narrative *object* of the discourse (the 'what about' of the story) crystallising a fundamental *value opposition* (wicked for some, desirable for others). This value opposition is, in turn, embodied in a *narrative personnel* arranged in a triangle of anti-heroes (the conspirators), heroes (those who unmask and fight against the conspiracy), and passive background actors (the deceived and manipulated public). Their interaction unfolds a more or less elaborate *plot* (a series of historical events, narratively connected in a cause-effect relationship).

While I am reluctant to regard 'weak logic' a necessary feature of any conspiracy theory, their often alienating effects on the part of those confronted with them (a group to which, after all, I also belong) cannot be overlooked. I suspect that it is often the same logical twists that embarrass (or amuse) some audiences, while they open up elucidating light bulb moments, attractive explanations and pivotal appeals to others. If this is so, we need to study these argumentative/narrative properties in an integrative way, not only pinpointing their flaws but also acknowledging their quality as plausibility creating and narratively satisfying features. To this aim, I propose to view conspiracy theories as specific configurations of what Jäger (2006) calls *discourse interlaces* (Diskursverschränkung). These are contingent confluences of discourses, (selectively) transporting "knowledge" across individual knowledge streams and thereby effecting new discursive formations and resultant social practices.[2] I assume conspiracy theories have a tendency—typical but not surely exclusive to them—to interlace discourses in a 'greedy' mode. This greediness manifests through accumulatively subsuming as many aspects of reality as possible, thereby creating a dense constellation of interlaced discourses. The densification of discourse interlaces is probably the main principle of plausibility creation: the more discourses that can be connected to each other, the more open questions can be solved, the more saturated and (to some) persuasive the theory becomes. This strategy is hardly exclusive to conspiracy theories, similar principles of greediness are at work in other totalising worldviews. Among those, conspiracy theories are distinguished by their *object* (the wicked end of some hidden agency). The general discursive effect is the creation of a new subject position: those who know the 'true' story are the gate-keepers of a knowledge dissolving the complexities of reality—in extreme cases, to "make sense of it all." This new subject position is relationally constituted. It only makes sense within the tripartite design of society described above, which is at the same time the basic

2 Jäger (2001; 2006) defines discourses as streams of knowledge through time.

communication model of a conspiracy discourse: those who possess and reveal the hidden knowledge (sender) about those who conspire to conceal it (message) to those who are still unaware and manipulated (recipient).

The Sri Lankan cases show examples of two different types of conspiracy theories, usually mixed to mutually enforce each other. Both amounting to different kinds of plot structures and pursued story closures: the wicked end can either be an already achieved status quo that has to be *removed* (for example, the still ongoing suppression of the Sinhalese Buddhists started in the colonial period), or it can be the anticipation of a future catastrophe that has to be *prevented* (for example, the eradication of everything Sinhalese or Buddhist from the island or from earth). Both types share the feature of not yet having come to a narrative closure. The social mechanism of a conspiracy theory demands that the plot has not yet come to a *narrative closure* because this integrates the social here-and-now into the conspiracy narrative as its latest episode, which is still in the making. This creates a specific space for social action, which is the pragmatic motor of a conspiracy theory: the wicked end can still be removed or prevented.

2 Māra is Controlling the Country: A Sinhala-Buddhist Conspiracy Theory in the Early Independent Period

Sri Lankan conspiracy culture has seen many such "latest episodes." The underlying value oppositions (Sinhalese-Buddhist vs. foreign-non-Buddhist) are open enough to allow the complete exchange of antagonists—which over the decades could be identified with the British, the Christian churches, the Tamils, the Muslims etc.—without disrupting the superordinate storyline to which the next generation can connect. Our first example connects the memory of the recently abolished British rule with the construction of a new target enemy, the Catholic Church.

The anti-colonial struggle of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries saw the rise of a religio-nationalist movement accusing the British colonial power of ruining Sri Lanka's (then Ceylon) indigenous culture by destroying Buddhism and the Sinhalese race. From this time onwards the coupling of these two elements, religion and race, formed the heart of Sinhalatva nationalism. The common enemy in this period was identified as the linkage between colonial domination and Christian mission. The further the Buddhist revival movement turned nationalist, the more it became restyled into a call for action to *protect* Buddhism against its enemies. Leading figures of early Sinhalatva such as Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933) had already

used the memory of the ancient Buddhist kings and refashioned their struggles against foreign (usually Tamil) invaders as historical parallels to the present situation; a strategy that proved successful in mobilising the masses for violent agitation against social scapegoats up to the present time. The rhetoric of unmasking the secret Christian religious agency in colonial politics—implying their desire to wipe Buddhism from Sri Lankan soil (and ultimately from the Earth)—denotes an early element of a conspiracy theoretical framework. Exposing this hidden agenda behind British colonial politics was the task of Valpaḷa Rāhula's *Bhikṣuvagē Urumaya*, first published in 1946 (published in English in 1974). Rāhula also argued that the protection of Buddhism against its enemies was an ancient duty of the Sinhalese.

Fully fledged conspiracy theories showed up a little later, after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, when the 'enemy' was no longer directly exposed. Now, the open foe became replaced by references to the socio-cultural turmoil left behind by the departed British rulers and the identification of leftover secret agents who attempt to perpetuate the oppression of the disempowered Sinhalese. Voices appeared that interpreted political and economic processes within the young republic as secretly controlled by "foreign forces" ultimately desiring to complete the destructive work begun by the colonial powers. In the following I will discuss one such voice: college teacher, politician, and religious activist Lokusatu Hewa Mettananda, in a 1956 speech entitled "A Conspiracy against Buddhism" (Mettananda 1956).

The year 1956 is remarkable in the modern history of Sri Lanka for three reasons. First, this was the year when the 2500th Buddhist Anniversary (Buddha Jayanti) was celebrated in Sri Lanka, on May 23. The country hosted a huge international congregation of Buddhists from all around the world, charged with expectations of a worldwide Buddhist awakening. Second, one month before the festival, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won the government elections in a landslide victory. The new president S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike won the elections mainly by promising "to restore Buddhism to its rightful place" on the top of Sri Lankan society. Third, on February 4, before the elections and the festival, the Buddhist Commission published the final report of a two-year inquiry into the state of Buddhism in the country (compare Bechert 1966; Tambiah 1992: 30–33). The report was titled "The Betrayal of Buddhism" and accused British colonial rule of having damaged the national Buddhist institutions to the point of near extinction. The report was first presented in a public meeting at Ananda College, of which Mettananda had been principal until the previous year. On this occasion Mettananda, himself a member of the Buddhist Commission, was giving his speech. The Buddha Jayanti festival was still anticipated at that

point, while the government elections, scheduled for the following month, cast a shadow of uncertainty and suspicion.

In this emotional mix of expectation and anxiety, Mettananda began his speech by announcing the Buddhist Commission's report to be a "turning point in our history" that would "decide forever the future history of the Buddhist religion and of the Sinhalese people in this country." Referring to the report, he argues that under British rule the Church of England held sway in Sri Lanka, "doing everything in their power to destroy Buddhism." Nowadays, a new, hidden power could be detected which continued this destructive work: "Roman Catholicism, a religion directed and controlled by a foreign power, the Vatican!" After listing examples of the church's deep involvement in governmental sponsored projects, Mettananda paints a picture of the Catholic Church as the richest organisation in the country, "exploiting the poverty, ignorance and helplessness of the Buddhist masses" in order to become richer and richer (Mettananda 1956).

No secret agent without concealed helpers. Two of them are decried in the speech: the newspapers of a certain publishing house and the government itself. The Lake House Newspapers are accused of ridiculing anything Buddhist in their articles, while suppressing any critical news on the Catholic Church. Later on, Lake House is called a "truly anti-national and anti-Buddhist" publisher whose editorial board is controlled by Christians and has the "general policy to decry the Sinhalese language and Buddhism and to extol the virtues of Christianity and English." For Mettananda, quite the same holds true for the government. Also, the government is infiltrated by Christians who "fool the good-natured Buddhists" by seemingly supporting Buddhist revivalism, while "in reality aiding and abetting the rapid growth of the Vatican's power in this country at the expense of Buddhism." Most notably, the government refused to abandon English as the state language and to make Sinhala the only official language in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the government was trying to sabotage the upcoming Buddha Jayanti celebrations by creating an atmosphere in which the celebrations would get disorganised. Mettananda avoids naming the ruling party explicitly, however, it is clear to the audience that his accusations are directed not only towards the members of the cabinet but in general towards the United National Party (UNP), which had dominated parliament since independence. This means that also the government—and by extension the UNP—was anti-national and anti-Buddhist. What is more obvious than assuming a secret relationship between the government and the Lake House Newspapers as remote-controlled instruments to deceive society? Ultimately both were willing helpers of the Vatican, because there was "a deep laid conspiracy between the

Church and the government to extend the Church's influence on the one side and to bring Buddhism to ridicule on the other." A conspiracy theory of global scope like Mettananda's is hardly complete without embedding accusations within large-scaled cultural stereotypes:

> Both government and Lake House stand for the American Way of Life. The sobriety, the restraint, the simplicity advocated by the Buddha are anathema to them. They stand for libertinism, sensuality and self-indulgence which are the keynote of the life in the decadent West.
>
> METTANANDA 1956

The speech concludes with a political battle-cry in which Mettananda invokes an ancient Buddhist imagery; the defence against Māra, the demonic deceiver and cosmic arch-enemy of Buddhism:

> In the forthcoming elections, I am afraid the *Times* and Lake House Newspapers will educate the Buddhist voter to vote for the party which maintains and supports Christianity and which is deceiving the Buddhists day in and day out. They are the institutions of Mara. Do not be deceived by them. Mara is now controlling the country. The Buddhists must prepare for a great struggle. Let the Maha Sangha give us the lead.
>
> METTANANDA 1956

Mettananda's speech captures the principal tone of the Buddhist Commission's report itself. Three years previously, D.C. Vijayawardhana, another member of the Buddhist Commission, published his book *Dharmavijaya: Revolt in the Temple* (1953), which can be regarded as the manifesto of Sinhalatva. These two texts along with the report itself belong to the same discourse coalition and were written by members of the Buddhist Commission. Therefore it is justified to analyse them as an intersected discursive unity.

The texts give a devastating survey of the state and condition of Buddhism in independent Sri Lanka. Like Mettananda, the report also argues that Sri Lanka was still governed by European values and worldviews, mediated by present politicians and administrators who are anglicised Sri Lankans alienated from their native culture. This is the principal value opposition: there is a *native culture*, idealised with recourse to Buddhist values (explicated as "sobriety, restraint and simplicity" by Mettananda), which is in general decline because of the society's orientation towards *Western decadence* (the "American Way of Life" or "libertinism, sensuality, self-indulgence"). This opposition pair recasts the template of the anti-hero. During the anti-colonial struggle the

enemy was British, now he is no longer easily identified by his national or ethnic affiliation. Rather, it is fellow citizens living in the neighbourhood who embody 'foreignness' as a deliberately adopted property, tempting in its false promises but alien to the heart of the nation's culture. A common polemical expression for a Sri Lankan (or other South Asian) mimicking Western lifestyle is 'Brown Sahib' or 'Brown Whitey' (*kalu suddha*), terms conveying the accusation of being a traitor to one's own culture.[3] The knowledge-concept of the 'Brown Sahibs' and their threat to the native culture is a powerful device created by this discourse. In due course, it has effected numerous political and legal measurements to purify society from 'foreign elements' and to improve its religious and moral condition. To this end, already the report of the Buddhist Commission suggested the prohibition of "obscene books," the prescription of indigenous dresses for officials, and a reform and general re-empowerment of the Buddhist monastic communities.

Although the 'Brown Sahibs' are despised as traitors of native culture, they are not necessarily conspirators. However, in Mettananda's conspiracy framework they are the visible product as well as potential recruits for those actors plotting and pushing the hidden takeover by anti-Buddhist/anti-Sinhalese powers. It seems typical, if not a *conditio sine qua non*, for a conspiracy theory to identify 'the enemy' on two different levels. First, there is the sometimes faceless and phantom-like, superordinate agency that is the origin, controller, and beneficiary of the wicked end. Rhetorically, this agency is often represented in form of a synecdoche: the West, the Muslims, the British, the Tamils, the Catholic Church. On the second level, this force commands a flock of executors who are identified with concrete, usually well-known and powerful persons of public life. These are accused of being responsible for concrete action steps towards the achievement of the superordinate power's goals. These collaborators can be of two kinds. They can be ignorant puppets or under-cover agents. The mission of the latter necessarily includes obscuring what is actually going on, thus calling for revelatory speech about the conspiracy.

The social diagnosis of Mettananda's speech is a typical example of this enemy configuration. His superordinate controlling agency is the Catholic Church. He avoids personal attacks against concrete church officials, which rather turns the Church into a faceless monster. When it comes to the collaborators, the tables are turned. Especially in the case of Lake House Press, "the public enemy no. 1 of Buddhism," Mettananda makes much effort to unmask the dark doings

3 Compare also Steward (2014: 258–259), n.15. A similar cuss word is *thuppahi* who is a person of "mixed race," usually of one Sinhalese and one Portuguese parent; this term can convey a similar connotation of having no concern or respect for Sinhalese culture.

of its then-present owner, a Christian of course. He is presented as a collaborator of the second type, an under-cover agent consciously working for the goals of the Catholic Church but concealing his true aims in public. The government, however, has predominantly, but not exclusively, the characteristics of the "ignorant puppet" type of collaborators. On the one hand, it supports Buddhist projects. On the other hand it sells the country to the Catholic Church and therefore, knowingly or unknowingly, it pushes a long-term process that will ultimately wipe Buddhism from Sri Lankan society. All in all, the government is ambivalent and therefore too weak and numbed to recognise and ward off the influence of the Church. The fact that the ruling UNP consisted of many members educated in British universities—that is, 'Brown Sahibs'—surely increased the plausibility of the argument.

In terms of narrative plot structures, all three texts work with a fourfold temporal horizon. The past is divided into: (a) a *remote past* before colonialism, which is imagined to have been a golden age characterised by a society deeply rooted in Buddhist principles—disciplined, frugal, and tolerant; (b) a *proximate past* starting with a historical cut produced by the arrival of the colonial powers; (c) the *present* is envisaged as a continuation of the proximate past—a distinction between the colonial period and the nine years since the country's independence is not marked by a clear boundary, rather, the argumentation rests on the image that independence has not really changed society's overall situation; and (d) imaginations of the *future* are, consequently, governed by the expectation of "revival" and "overcoming," which is hoped to restore the conditions of the remote past—but also by the fear of disaster if appropriate counter-action fails. As indicated by the beginning of Mettananda's speech, a turning point is believed to have commenced at that point as the report of the Buddhist Commission has unmasked the true state of things. This peripeteia is expected to gain further momentum through the upcoming Buddhist anniversary. Mettananda does not refer to the *remote past* directly. He rather alludes to it by using speech figures of revival and the close historical relationship between Buddhism and the Sinhalese.

A tripartite plot structure—the golden past, the decline caused by the colonialists, and the upcoming revival—was already a core narrative in the nineteenth century Buddhist revival movement, and the topos had belonged to the naturalised knowledge of Mettananda's audience for a long time. In the speech he concentrates on depicting the *present* as an intermediate period, extending the distress of the colonial times but only a few weeks from a major revolution (the Buddha Jayanti festival), which would mark the return of the Buddhist world to its due power. This narrative figure can be considered a central peripeteia of the early post-independence discourse. It should be noticed how the

time horizon has shifted in comparison to the pre-independence discourse. Prior to 1948, liberation from colonial rule was expected to solve virtually all problems. By 1956 many Sri Lankans realised that a formal political act was not enough to really emancipate the nation; independence had not revived the idealised society of pre-colonial Sri Lankan civilisation. True freedom is yet to come. Obviously, it was constantly prevented by some cause. The disappointment with the slow or even non-existent progress of the state to regain its imagined former greatness was the central topos providing a fertile soil for conspiracy theories.

Towards the end of his speech, Mettananda invokes a powerful religious imagery, describing the Lake House Press and the UNP as "institutions of Māra" and exhorts his audience not to be deceived by them. As an appendix, Mettananda presents the so-called *dasa paṇata*, a 10-point agenda passed by the monks-party EBP (Eksat Bhikkhu Peramuṇa) to be implemented by the next government. The second point again refers to this figure: "To oppose the forces of Māra (evil) in whatever guise they may appear" (Mettananda 1956). The British rule in Sri Lanka was branded by Vijayawardhana as the most malicious embodiment of Māra that ever existed:

> British imperialism has been the *Māra* (Evil One) of Buddhism; in its short career of 150 years it has destroyed more Buddhist kingdoms than any other single agency had done during the last 2500 years.
>
> VIJAYAWARDHANA 1953: 469

Mettananda's reference to Māra clearly connects to these statements of Vijayawardhana, his colleague in the Buddhist Commission: that even after independence, Sri Lanka is still ruled by Māra's henchmen, and even more so than the British colonial rulers, the Catholic church resorts to the ways of Māra—trickery and concealment—to destroy Sinhalese national pride and religious heritage.

Right from the outset, Buddhist mythology can be viewed as a cosmic fight against delusion, so it is not surprising that Māra appears in the rhetoric of modern Buddhist conspiracy theorists. It is doubtful whether Mettananda and Vijayawardhana accepted this figure as a 'really existing' demon. As typical promoters of a rationalised, de-mythologised Buddhist modernism, their references to Māra seem to be of an allegorical nature. However, Māra works for them as a symbol linking the current struggles to a wider cosmic and historical context.

The 'greediness' of this discourse is evident. The economic success, political stability, and social reorder expected once the yoke of colonial rule was shaken off, was soon replaced by disappointment. In search of a scapegoat a

dense web of discursive interlaces was constructed, connecting government decisions, economic and power asymmetries, education and language policies, religious rivalry, the media landscape, and major-scale cultural prejudices into a single explanation of reality. Everything pointed to a major conspiracy holding the country in its sway.

The perhaps most effective discourse was produced by the contrasting juxtaposition of the present situation with the remote past. Mettananda, Vijayawardhana, and the report of the Buddhist Commission managed to mobilise the public by connecting the present to the centuries-old Sri Lankan Buddhist *heilsgeschichte* which was classically formulated in the *Mahāvaṃsa*, the 'Great Chronicle' of Sri Lanka composed in the sixth century. The *Mahāvaṃsa* narrativises Sri Lanka's past as characterised by a special symbiosis between Buddhism and the inhabitants of the country. According to this tradition, the island was chosen by the Buddha to give home and bring glory to his teaching. Thus, both religion and country are tied together and have a common destiny (see Bechert 1969). The Buddhists of Sri Lanka thereby become not only practitioners, but mandated custodians of Buddhism whose duty is to safeguard its original message for the sake of mankind. Already in the *Mahāvaṃsa* it is nearly always foreigners—either Tamil invaders or pseudo-Buddhist heretics immigrating from India—who endanger this mission.

The narratological object 'Buddhism endangered' bridges the present with the past. The present struggle, thereby, gains historical depth as the newest episode of an ancient plot: Buddhism is again existentially threatened by foreigners, and it is the duty of its custodians—now called the "Sinhalese nation"—to rescue and protect it. This story turns into a conspiracy theory because of the new quality of the danger brought by the British, in Vijayawardhana's words: "intrigue, treachery, conspiracy and false propaganda" (1953: 469). The Tamil enemies of the *Mahāvaṃsa* were an openly visible, physical danger. The threat conjured by Mettananda and Vijayawardhana, in contrast, is the idea of a social majority threatened to lose its cultural self-determination under the conditions of religious and ethnic plurality—a much less visible danger, discernible only through intellectual operations of unmasking the hidden nature of the social situation. The Catholics, the Tamils, and the UNP were the chosen scapegoats who were accused of continuing the wicked end after the British had left.

The effects of this discourse were immediate and massive. In the beginning of 1956 the ruling UNP party fell victim to a propaganda campaign, decrying its functionaries as too corrupted by Western influences and too liberal towards the minorities. This was how their reluctance to make Buddhism the state religion of Sri Lanka and to grant special privileges for Buddhism and the Sinhalese population was explained. The campaign was headed by the

"fiercely anti-UNP, anti-West and anti-Catholic" (Imtiyaz 2014: 319) Buddhist monk-party EBP. With their support, the opposition party SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) won the 1956 parliament elections with the promise to immediately abandon Tamil and English as official languages of the state and to restore Buddhism in its former place on top of society.

The influence of Buddhist monks on the voting public played a major role in the SLFP landslide victory, leaving the UNP with only eight seats in parliament. The decidedly Sinhalese chauvinism displayed by the new government during the following years led to the well-known deepening of Sinhalese-Tamil tensions that finally resulted in a civil war with the militant Tamil organisation Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Although the enemy image of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists shifted more and more to an anti-Tamil antagonism during those years, the theory of a Catholic conspiracy survived up to the present day.

3 Conspiracy of Conspiracies: Who Wants Sri Lanka to Drown in Conflict?

In 2014, Senaka Weeraratne published a blog with the title "Mettananda's Grim Warning of [A Conspiracy against Buddhism] (1956) Still Worthy of Serious Attention" (Weeraratne 2014). As the title suggests, this article actualises the conspiracy theories of the 1950s and directs its thrust towards a newly discovered enemy.

In his summary of Mettananda's speech, the author draws a causal connection between the conspiracy discourse of that time and the result of the elections in April 1956:

> The architects of this unique electoral victory that resulted in what may be termed the Buddhist Revolution of 1956, were L.H. Mettananda and N.Q. Dias, and other Buddhist leaders and monks campaigning under the banner of the Eksath Bhikshu Peramuna. They went from house to house in a massive national effort calling on the people to overthrow the yoke of Brown Sahibs and Thuppahis governing like puppets under the direction of Abrahamic religious influence in a contest that was rhetorically painted as the "Mara Yuddha" [battle against Māra]. To defeat Mara the scriptural enemy of the Buddha Sasana was a moral obligation of every Buddhist. This appeal to the most vital emotions of the Buddhists struck a deep chord.
>
> WEERARATNE 2014

Here the terms "Brown Sahib" and "Thuppahi" denote specifically the members of the UNP government, the main collaborators of Mettananda's conspiracy theory. Taking the fate of the country out of the hands of these "puppets" (of the Catholic Church) was, according to this restatement, a "Buddhist Revolution." In accordance with Weeraratne's more explicit tone, the cruelties of the colonial powers also were depicted in a much more drastic way than the documents of the 1950s had dared:

> One has to overlook history particularly during the Portuguese period of rule when Christian missionaries, the Catholic Church under the direction of Papal Bulls worked hand in glove with the oppressive Portuguese colonial Govt. to destroy Buddhism calling it a religion of heathens and force Buddhist monks to flee to the safety of the Sithawaka and Kandyan Kingdoms, leaving behind only Ganinanses (Buddhist practitioners wearing white cloth and in hiding under fear of persecution and even death) to cater to the religious needs of Buddhists in Portuguese controlled areas of Ceylon.... Colonialism was a crime against humanity. Colonial history of genocide and mass murder should not be whitewashed for purpose of appeasement or political advantage.
>
> WEERARATNE 2014

Most remarkably in this article, the foreign enemy is no longer restricted to Christians alone. It is the "Abrahamic religions," a trope which predominantly intends to add 'the Muslims' to the image of the collective foe. In order to counteract the threat of the "Abrahamic religions of the West"—"the West" now includes Islamic countries of (what Europeans would call) the Middle East—the author calls for the solidarity of all Asian religions under the leadership of China. The result is Weeraratne's own version of Huntington's "clash of civilizations":

> We need a powerhouse to protect Buddhism. China meets that description. China too faces the same challenge from Abrahamic religions as the rest of Buddhist Asia and even Hindu India. The time has come for potential victims in Asia to join hands. Asian unity must be based on the foundation of Eastern religions and cultures i.e. Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism etc. Let us all hope that the collapse of Buddhism as the historical majority religion in South Korea in the last 30 years will not get duplicated in Sri Lanka.
>
> WEERARATNE 2014

The discursive greediness of conspiracy theories is nowhere in our material more explicit than in this passage. The course of 500+ years of colonial and

post-colonial history of the 'eastern' hemisphere (under implicit inclusion of even non-colonised regions of Asia) is subsumed under the story of a simple East-West dualism that, in turn, is shaped by presuming a common hidden agenda—perhaps a shared nature—of three "Western" religions.

This document brings us back to the present anti-Muslim conspiracy theories of the *Bodu Bala Sena*.[4] Anti-Muslim agitation began soon after the civil war with the LTTE was brought to a bloody end in 2009 when buckets of pig-blood were thrown into the courtyards of Sri Lankan mosques. In 2012 and 2013, mosques along with shops and warehouses owned by Muslims in Colombo were attacked by agitated mobs. June 2014 saw raids on Muslim shops in the towns Aluthgame, Beruwala, and Darga where three people were shot dead in the course of street fights. Many believe that these raids were systematically planned by the BBS. The physical violence was accompanied by anti-Muslim hate speech increasing in political speeches, newspapers, and social media. Anti-Muslim riots had already occurred during the late anti-colonial struggle and in the wake of the civil war (Steward 2014), however, as Steward explicates, the recent anti-Muslim resentments differed from the previous ones by being "more explicitly religious in character: We are given to understand that Buddhist nationalists wish to express their Buddhist identities by targeting Muslim communities" (2014: 244).

The BBS and the escalation of anti-Muslim violence rose together. The group separated from the older nationalist monk-party Jatika Hela Urumaya (JHU) in 2009 as a more aggressive and militant faction.[5] According to Steward the activities of the BBS are simply an extension of the pre-existing "anti-Tamil, anti-other, political platforms" maintained by the JHU (2014: 256). However, we have to take into account that with the switch from Tamils to Muslims as the targeted enemy, the imagined international base of the 'enemy's' potential supporters also widened from a bilateral scope towards an image of a more or less global threat. This is important in order to understand how the relatively insignificant Muslim portion of the Sri Lankan population (8.5 per cent) could be constructed as a major menace; namely, by presuming an alleged Muslim rear cover provided by a global Islamist agency. Theories of an international conspiracy were already produced in respect to the "Tamil threat," but the idea of a Muslim extremism operating worldwide is much more powerful and gains (a deceptive) credibility by resonating to Islamophobic resentments all around the world.

4 This topic is hardly studied yet. Therefore, I give only a basic outline and point the reader to the following studies for more information on the history and reasons of the conflict: Steward (2014); Heslop (2014); Jones (2015); Gravers (2015); Haniffa (2016).

5 On the JHU and their role in the escalation in the later phase of the civil war, see Deegalle (2004).

Conspiracy theories govern the rhetorical side of these events and are uttered by multiple camps with different aims. I have determined three major types:

1. There is a Muslim conspiracy to take over the country.
2. The Sri Lankan president is controlling the BBS to fulfil his own domestic political tasks.
3. The whole issue is made up by an international conspiracy to break up Sri Lankan social unity.

The first one is a superstructure legitimising Islamophobic violence. It is widely promoted by the BBS members and sympathisers of anti-Muslim agitation. Basically it is old wine in new bottles. The BBS claims to protect the Sinhalese nation and their religious heritage because, otherwise, Muslim population increase, conversions to Islam (Hertzberg 2015), and imminent invasion of jihadists will turn Sri Lanka into a Muslim country. This mission is linked to an alleged international conspiracy plotting Sri Lanka's conversion into a Muslim country. This is concisely expressed in a self-description of the Sinhala Ravaya (Voice of the Sinhalese), an anti-Muslim lay-organisation with links to the BBS:

> Let it never happen that the Sinhala and Buddhist nation be swept from the Earth because of foreign and domestic plots. We have seen similar situations with similar results of such plots. The reason for that is there are a lot of organisations and governments arising that do not have an aim to protect Buddhists and Sinhalese. Our presence exists for this, to recognize it, to suppress and control the development of similar changes.[6]

The reference to "similar situations" alludes to countries that have turned from Buddhist to Muslim cultures in remote and recent history: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Maldives. This argument was also used by BBS leader Gnanasara: "The same thing may happen in Sri Lanka if we're not careful" (Mallawarachi 2014) The identification of the controlling force behind the plot is rarely more concrete. Most of the time any concrete identity of a plotter seems to dissolve into a vague idea of a collective agency emerging from an innate Muslim desire to conquer the world and to extinguish other religions. Another related rhetoric device is a phantom-like threat called "global Muslim extremism." Anyway, the Muslim threat is painted as a hidden enemy that was almost overlooked while the attention of the Sinhalese Buddhists was distracted by the civil war: As Haniffa puts it:

6 From http://sinhalaraavaya.com/about.html, as cited and translated by Steward (2014: 246).

> The BBS monks stated that if the war had ended ten years later than it did, the end of the war would have been celebrated not by a Sinhala country but by a Muslim one. They thanked Rajapaksha for ending that war in order that this new enemy—the Muslim—could be identified and dealt with.
>
> HANIFFA 2016: 5

Sometimes, Western NGOs play at least an auxiliary role in the conspiracy. For example, they persuade Sinhalese women to engage in birth control, while Muslim women on the other hand "are constantly pregnant" (Haniffa 2016, 9). This demographic theory of a creeping Muslim takeover is backed by another rumour, namely that Muslim shopkeepers sell underwear to the Sinhalese that are prepared with chemicals inducing infertility (Harrison 2014). Meanwhile, as an article found by Steward on Facebook explains, Sri Lanka had turned into "Eastern Small Arabia" with 47 mosques in an area of 6 km (Steward 2014: 250). The same Facebook group stigmatises Muslim land seizures by turning Buddhist sacred sites into mosques (251). The complex issue of halal food certification, which was widely discussed in recent years (252–256), also had its conspiracy theoretical dimensions. As Harrison (2014) mentioned, the BBS explained this practice to be an economical trick by Muslim businessmen to raise money in order to arm jihadists. The essence of the first type of conspiracy theory is concisely expressed in the suicide note of the Buddhist monk Indaratana Thera, who committed suicide by self-immolation in front of the Temple of Tooth in Kandy in May 2013:

> Let us stop the doctrine that murders cows. Let us remove terrorism. Let parliament accept the bill that opposes being turned to religion by force. Let the union of multi-national, multi-religious, pan-religions that destroy the Buddha's teaching disappear. Let us construct a suitable constitution for a Buddhist nation.
>
> As cited in STEWARD 2014: 256.

The latter two types of conspiracy theory are promoted by opponents of the BBS. Rejecting their anti-Muslim conspiracy theory, they promote a meta-conspiracy theory: how could the BBS have emerged to power so quickly and out of nowhere? How could their nonsensical conspiracy theory dominate the discourse? Someone powerful and wealthy patronising them must be in control from the background.

The second theory claims that this 'someone' is none other than then-president Mahinda Rajapakse, together with his brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa,

his minister of defence. Thus, the top of the government approves the BBS and covers up their crimes (compare Gravers 2015: 16). Some believe that the Rajapakse brothers "unleashed" the BBS to help them win the next elections. This argument implies that the government was expecting an election defeat and "played out the racist card" to whip up the Sinhalese voters (compare Harrison 2014; compare Anonymous 2013).

The third conspiracy theory was launched by president Rajapakse himself. In a number of public statements he denied that there is any anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka at all. The whole trouble was rather caused by those who try to cause a state-crisis by staging protests against Islamophobic violence, which in fact never happened. These protesters, so Rajapakse alleges, are part of a foreign conspiracy aiming at a destabilisation of the country and his removal as president (Rupasinghe 2014). This allusion to a foreign conspiracy remains fuzzy in his speeches in the sense that he never identifies any concrete originators or what their motivation could be.[7] Nevertheless, the *Pakistan Observer* newspaper backed up his theory with yet another twist in June 2014, stating that some Buddhists had been instigated to perform violence against Muslims by an international conspiracy trying to damage the bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and Pakistan (Anonymous 2014). A bit less fuzzy but no less fancy, is an online article originally published by the *The Island* newspaper on August 1, 2014 which denies that there is any problem caused by Muslims in Sri Lanka; nevertheless there is, indeed, anti-Muslim agitation going on (Hussain 2014). How did that happen? He explains that no Sri Lankan was ever aware of Muslim extremism or had a problem with halal food certification before the BBS launched their campaign. Taking the suspiciously quick rise of the BBS out of the blue into account, one must ask who the *real* patrons of this group are. The argument is twofold: first, it is Western countries who have a problem with alleged Muslim extremism and halal food; and second, some BBS monks were sponsored by the Norwegian government to travel to Norway in October 2011. What have they done there? Norway, as Hussain highlights, had earlier "almost succeeded to set up Eelam" (2014). This statement alludes to the interpretation of Norway's role as mediator during the civil war as support of the LTTE in their attempt to establish an independent Tamil state (Eelam) in Sri Lanka. Now, obviously, the BBS met Norwegian Islamophobes in 2011 to plot their anti-Muslim activity. The reason for the Norwegian conspirators is to bring president

7 Conspiracy theory 2 and 3 are directly opposed and reflect one another. Thus, the anti-Rajapakse camp—the promoters of theory 2—spreads the opinion that the president uses his own vague phantom of an international conspiracy against his person only to cover up his own involvement in the organisation of the anti-Muslim raids.

Rajapakse to fall because he was against the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution (so-called 13A) which would secure greater independence for Tamil-dominated districts and declare Tamil as an official language of the state.

4 Conclusion

Conspiracy theories came up in Sri Lanka in the early phase after independence when people realised that freedom from colonial rule had not turned the country into the prosperous moral stronghold of global civilisation that had previously been imagined. Sinhala-Buddhist hardliners soon identified cultural, ethnic, and religious plurality and the unequal distribution of resources and privileges as the problem keeping Buddhism and the Sinhalese race suppressed. For them, nothing had changed since the yoke of colonial power had been shaken off. On the contrary, the innately 'un-Buddhist' American way of life or 'Western decadence' runs rampant and spoils the youth of the country. In this situation, imaginations of the past, which had already empowered the anti-colonial freedom struggle in the previous decades, received a new twist. While the enemies of the Buddhist kings of the past were openly visible aggressors, the enemies of today threaten Buddhism in a subtler manner.

A narratological analysis of the conspiracy discourses promoted from the 1950s onwards shows that these connect to the cultural memory by utilising familiar narrative templates and value oppositions, transformed and updated to suit modern epistemologies and to convey religio-nationalist agendas. This starts with a pan-Buddhist mythologem: while the truth revealed by the Buddha is eternal, or rather "un-constructed" (*asaṃskṛta*), the process of communicating and transmitting this truth relies on mundane entities (language, human intellects etc.). Buddhism, as an '-ism', is, therefore, transitory and unstable by nature—or, to put it in mythical language, subject to Māra, 'Death'. Sri Lankan Buddhist historiography has turned this principle into a master-narrative of religious self-promotion, as it shows how the kings and monks of the country have successfully warded off any danger for the Buddha's pristine teaching throughout history. Modern conspiracy theories hook up with the same rhetorical figure to construct the enemy image: every force challenging the island, its inhabitants and the orthodoxy of its religion is an enemy of 'true Buddhism' and has only one intention—the destruction of the Buddha's message. In this framework, agencies accused of suppressing and harming Buddhism and its Sinhalese custodians, appear as Māra's collaborators executing his plans to wipe the path to deathlessness from the surface of earth.

As an interpretation of reality, this conspiracy theoretical framework is narratively pleasing. On the one hand, it gives an easy explanation for the cognitive dissonance resulting from the experience of being marginalised despite feeling superior: others are to blame. And they keep the 'good guys' down because they are ignorant and hostile to the fundamental goodness embodied by them (in other words: because they are the "bad guys" they are evil). On the other hand, the defensive mentality resulting from this situation becomes naturalised: the world is Māra's battlefield, and the Sinhalese have been his declared adversaries and fought his agents for ages.

The most recent episode, the conspiracy theories around anti-Muslim violence and the Bodu Bala Sena, is old wine in new bottles, at least as far as the discursive construction is concerned. The enemies have been replaced once again and new forms of 'resistance' have been forwarded, but the basic narrative is very similar to the preceding anti-Catholic and anti-Tamil discourses. However, if we survey the genealogy of these discourses, we can detect an increasing expansion of the conflicts which discourse-internally corresponds to a widening of the organising (narrative) *object*: while in ancient historiography 'Buddhism endangered' referred to the "only true" Sāsana within an unwelcome inner-Buddhist plurality, it turned to a national token of a challenged cultural identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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CHAPTER 12

Buddhist Islamophobia: Actors, Tropes, Contexts

Iselin Frydenlund

1 Introduction

In recent years, Muslim minority communities in Buddhist majority states have experienced an increasing number of attacks on their lives and properties, culminating in the ethnic cleansing of the Muslim Rohingya population in 2017. During the fall of 2017 nearly 800,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar into neighbouring Bangladesh in order to escape atrocities committed during the Burmese military's 'clearance operations' against the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a small and ill-equipped militant group. In addition to massive violence against Rohingya civilians, allegations have been made that Rakhine Buddhist civilians (at least in certain villages) were active in the violence (Wa Lone *et al*. 2018). The atrocities in Rakhine followed repeated waves of violence since 2012, spreading from Rakhine to other parts of Myanmar, mostly affecting Muslim lives and property.

From 2012 onwards, Muslim minorities in Sri Lanka were also victims of intimidation and violence, the gravest being the so-called Aluthgama riots in 2014, resulting in the death of three Muslims, hundreds of displaced persons, and massive destruction of Muslim property. While anti-Muslim attacks do not mean that Muslims living in Buddhist countries are generally at risk of persecution, weak state protection of Muslim communities has left them at risk of violence and intimidation when other groups in society see benefits from starting a conflict.

Violence against Muslim minorities has taken place in the wake of intense anti-Muslim campaigns, most vociferously articulated by certain groups of Buddhist monks, who in sermons and public speeches have warned against the dangers of Islam. While there is reason to believe that anti-Muslim sentiments might be shared by a larger section of the Buddhist monastic order (the Sangha) in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, such systematic anti-Muslim discourses have for the most part been articulated by specific monastic groups.[1]

1 So far, we have no quantitative data on Islamophobic (or xenophobic) tendencies in the Myanmar or Sri Lankan populations at large.

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These movements are engaged in aggressive—and occasionally militant—anti-Muslim campaigns, based upon the fear of a global Islamic conspiracy to eradicate Buddhism.

The concept of Islamophobia is highly contested, due, among other things, to the implication that fear of Islam is rendered pathological. However, the term has established itself as an academic concept, broadly referring to an indiscriminate hatred of Muslims and of Islam, often followed by exclusionary social practices.[2] Thus, a distinction has to be made between general dislike of Islam or legitimate forms of critique of Islam, and Islamophobia as a religious, cultural, and political phenomenon (Esposito and Kalin 2011; Bangstad 2016). Consequently, it is not my concern here to analyse political disputes over religion in public space, access to sacred places, or state preference for Buddhism and its implications for religious minorities. Rather, my aim is to identify tropes and themes in Buddhist fears of anything Muslim when this fear of 'anything Muslim' is closely linked to theories about a global Islamic plot to govern the world. Thus, I distinguish Islamophobia from general anti-Muslim sentiments and opt for a narrow understanding of 'Buddhist Islamophobia', defining it as the deep fear about the existence of a secret and coordinated global Islamic plot to eradicate Buddhism and eventually rule the world. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to cross-cultural comparison of various forms of Islamophobia, and so far, most research has been carried out on Islamophobia in Christian and/or secular liberal contexts in North America and Europe. This article seeks to address this research lacunae and analyse various aspects of Asian Buddhists' fear of Islam: how do Buddhist conspiracy theories envision the Islamic takeover, and how are individual Muslims seen as local agents of such larger schemes? Finally, the chapter discusses the political contexts of Buddhist conspiracy theories: why do Buddhist conspiracy theories about Islam flourish from 2012 onwards, and how are they related to domestic and regional politics?

2 Actors

A conspiracist worldview alone is 'unredemptive,' O'Leary (1994) points out. The tale of the corruption of the world needs villains; its rectification needs heroes. The villains in contemporary Buddhist protectionist ideology are Muslims; its heroes are Buddhist monks who with all means will fight 'Islamisation' and protect Buddhism. Buddhist fears of Islam is nothing new, but as recent research has shown (Kyaw 2016; Walton and Hayward 2014; Crouch 2016; Haniffa

2 For a recent analysis of the genealogy of the concept, see Bangstad (2016).

et al. 2014; de Silva 2016), current radical Buddhist protectionist movements show a dislike of Islam previously not seen. Although not necessarily the *raison d'être* of new Buddhist protectionist movements, Islamophobic tropes certainly serve as their gravitational point. The three most influential Buddhist groups of anti-Islamic orientation in Asia are the 969 and the MaBaTha in Myanmar, and the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force [BBS]) in Sri Lanka. Post-independent Burma and Sri Lanka have a vibrant history of Buddhist pressure groups in public life, whose aim has been to 'restore' Buddhism to its 'rightful' place in society after the colonial dismantling of the traditional Buddhist polities. Buddhist revivalism overlapped with ethnic majoritarianism, leading to the axiomatic position of the term 'Buddhist nationalism'. However the content and way of operation of the new movements require us to rethink the category of 'Buddhist nationalism'. The language of restoration (against Buddhist decline under British colonialism) is less prevalent now and the main foes are not Christians anymore. As we shall see, conflation of majority ethnicity and Buddhism still plays an important role, but to a lesser degree than in the post-colonial years. Rather, I suggest that what we see is a move towards a shared Buddhist identity vis-à-vis a defined religious 'Other' across national, ethnic and/or regional difference, which is better captured in the term 'Buddhist protectionist ideology'.

Generally speaking, we may say that in spite of internal variation, such protectionist movements belong to a broader tradition of 'political Buddhism'. By political Buddhism I refer to a set of ideologies, articulated and acted upon by both lay Buddhists and members of the Sangha, holding that Buddhism should guide social and political life, and moreover that it is a state responsibility to protect and foster Buddhism (Frydenlund 2016). The exact discursive content of such movements has varied during the course of time, but the most radical of them are all based upon notions of threats posed by non-Buddhist 'Others'. Moreover, it should be noted that in comparison to most groups and actors in Europe and North America that articulate strong anti-Muslim sentiments, the main producers and transmitters of Buddhist Islamophobic discourses do not belong to counter-cultural milieus, far-right extremist groups, or anti-elitist populist movements. Rather, we find such discourses among the religious elites—that is, among monks and nuns—imbuing conspiracy theories about Islam and Muslims with a certain religious quality, as well as authority, quite unprecedented in Western contexts. In the following, I shall briefly introduce the three Buddhist monastic groups of the 969, the MaBaTha, and the BBS, arguing that while they are far from identical and formed in different political contexts, they share two fundamental traits, namely conspiracy theories about Islam and Muslims and a militant language of the need to protect Buddhism against the Islamic threat.

2.1 *969 and the MaBaTha in Myanmar*

In 2012 a group of young Buddhist monks in Mawlamyine, the capital of the Mon state in south-eastern Myanmar, established a network to 'protect Buddhism' called the 969.[3] The name 969 refers to the nine qualities of the Buddha, the six of the Dhamma, and the nine of the Sangha, which together constitute the 'three Jewels of Buddhism', thus drawing upon key Theravada Buddhist symbols. Additionally, 969 stands as the discursive anti-thesis to '786', which is the numerical representation of the first verse of the Qur'an, and is commonly at display in Muslim shops throughout South and Southeast Asia.

The network produces artefacts, such as stickers and flags with the 969 emblem on it. The emblem depicts the Buddhist flag, the number 969 in Burmese script, and Emperor Ashoka's pillar, the latter being one of the oldest symbols of Buddhist political power. Such emblems were soon on display in shops and taxis throughout Buddhist Myanmar, as a sign of Buddhist unity across geographical and ethnic boundaries within the country,[4] but also as a boundary-marker vis-à-vis Muslim shopkeepers who were conceptualised as an economic threat. The 969 monks showed themselves to be efficient users of traditional means of communication such as sermons, print media, and videotapes, but—along with the Internet revolution since the 2011 political liberalisation—also of new social media such as Facebook and YouTube.[5]

The 969 monks have become controversial for their strong anti-Muslim stance, the most famous member being U Wirathu—the 969 spokesperson—who became an international media figure after being on a *Time* cover, titled "The Buddhist Face of Terror."[6] He is accused of hate speech against Muslims in social media and during religious sermons. He was jailed in 2003 by the military for instigating anti-Muslim violence,[7] but released in 2012, together with political prisoners, as part of former President Thein Sein's political reforms.

Closely related to, but separate from, the 969 is the so-called MaBaTha, which is an acronym for Ah-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shaung Ye a-Pwe, or

3 Inspired by a book published in 1997 by U Kyaw Lwin, former general and subsequent director of Ministry of Religious Affairs.

4 While the majority of Buddhists in Myanmar belong to the Bamar ethnic group, ethnic minorities such as Karen, Mon, and Arakanese are also predominantly Buddhist.

5 Organisations and persons operate with numerous Facebook pages, and allegations of fake sites have been made. U Wirathu's main site had in the beginning of 2017 close to 265 000 followers, a considerable number in the Burmese context.

6 'Wirathu' is a pen name and means hero. His monastic name is U Vicittabivamsa.

7 The exact motive behind his imprisonment remains disputed. U Wirathu himself denies this was the real reason. Some of his prison inmates hold that the reason was internal monastic disputes, and that alleged anti-Muslim violence was just a pretext to remove internal opposition. Personal interviews, Bangkok and Yangon, 2015.

the 'Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion'. This organisation was formed in June 2013 and compared to the 969 it has a more senior and less militant profile. The MaBaTha has succeeded in building up alliances across monastic divisions and in close relations with the monastic top hierarchy; it has built up a strong lay division and worked closely with leading government figures of the previous semi-civilian regime.

The most important agenda of the 969/MaBaTha has been to pass four laws "to protect race and religion", in order to stop what they see as the "islamization of Myanmar."[8] The laws seek to regulate marriages between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, to prevent forced conversions, to abolish polygamy and extra-marital affairs, and to promote birth control and family planning in certain regions of the country. The laws were passed by the parliament and the president in 2015 and is current law in Myanmar, partly overriding previous Buddhist and Muslim family laws. While U Wirathu is considered a controversial voice, other monks closely identified with the movement, such as Sithagu Sayadaw, enjoy enormous respect and influence throughout Buddhist Myanmar.

2.2 *The Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS)

In Sri Lanka the so far most militant Buddhist group is the BBS, which was formed in 2012, by a small group of Buddhist monks and lay people. Following familiar tropes in previous configurations of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, the BBS combines Buddhist fundamentalist concerns of secularisation, differentiation of society, and the alleged decay of Buddhism due to globalisation, with specific concerns regarding the protection of Sinhala Buddhist culture and heritage. It emphasises the dominance of Sinhala Buddhist culture over the island's multicultural past and present, and is critical of the international human rights paradigm, particularly minority rights. However, unlike earlier groups, the main foe in BBS discourse is Islam and Muslims, depicting them not only as threats to the state, but as we shall see, also as an economic threat to the urban Buddhist middle class. Like its counterparts in Myanmar, the BBS mobilises its temple networks for public rallies and public 'spectacles' where it stages its Buddhist protectionist and anti-Muslim agenda, and like the 969/MaBaTha it has shown itself to be a very efficient user of Facebook, and it live streams press conferences, mass rallies, or even confrontations with local Muslims at particular sites deemed to be of importance to Buddhism.

8 Personal interviews with U Wirathu and U Maung Chun, the general secretary of the MaBaTha, 2015. For more on the four race and religion laws, see Frydenlund (2017); Crouch (2016).

In Sri Lanka, the BBS is regarded as extremist and violent, and has become controversial for its alleged involvement in the Aluthgama violence in 2014. Some years prior to the violence, hate sentiment had been cultivated by the BBS via social media and through public protests statements,[9] and there had been sporadic violence against Muslim communities throughout the country in the same period—for example the attacks on the mosque in Dambulla in 2012, but the Aluthgama riots showed an unprecedented level of organisation and orchestration. The antecedent to the riots on June 15, 2014, was a BBS public rally in Aluthgama following an incident between a Buddhist monk and three Muslim youths. In his speech, the BBS General Secretary Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara concluded by saying that "in the future if another yellow robe is even touched, no need to go to the police, let the law of the jungle take over" (quoted in Haniffa *et al.* 2014: 19). Later, the rally formed a procession through town, which ended in massive riots. While the actual chronology of events, and the role played by the BBS or Muslim youth in the area, remains unclear and contested it is clear that the riots left the local Muslim communities far more damaged than their Sinhala Buddhist neighbours.

Like the 969/MaBaTha, the BBS is particularly concerned with sexuality and reproduction, and following familiar Islamophobic tropes in Europe and India, Muslim male sexuality is portrayed as aggressive and uncontrollable; Muslim men are accused of raping Buddhist women. To prevent "Buddhists from becoming a minority in their own country," (a popular slogan) BBS call for family planning policies, including legal regulation of women's reproductive health. BBS leaders have demanded a government shutdown of all family planning units so that Sinhala Buddhist women could produce more babies. At its inaugural meeting in Colombo in July 2012 the BBS declared its intention to pursue five goals: (1) to work for the increased birth rate of the Sinhala Buddhist population by challenging the government's birth control and family planning policies;[10] (2) legal reform to better protect the rights of the island's Buddhists, to abolish legal pluralism and implement one civil code (thus abolishing Muslim family law); (3) reform of the education system in line with Buddhist interests; (4) the formation of a government-sponsored body to ensure Buddhist 'orthodoxy' in books and media; and (5) implementation of a series of recommendations for reforming Buddhism already suggested in the 1950s. This five-fold resolution

9 For more detail on hate speech in social media and anti-Muslim sentiments in Sri Lanka, see Wickremesinhe and Hattotuwa (2016).

10 In Sri Lanka, Buddhist identity implies Sinhala ethnic identity, while Sinhala identity includes both Buddhist and Christian identities. In Myanmar, the picture is far more complex as Buddhists belong not only to the Burmese ethnic majority group, but also to ethnic minorities such as Mon, Arakanese, and Karen.

also suggests a government ban of Sri Lankan female labour migration to the Middle East. Maltreatment of Sri Lankan labourers in the Middle East has for long been a contested issue in Sri Lanka, and is increasingly being perceived as a religious issue by radical political Buddhist groups, including the BBS.

3 Buddhist Historiography and Notions of Decline

Asbjørn Dyrendal (2016) suggests that perhaps the most obvious place for conspiracy theory in religion involves that of catastrophic apocalypticism. As is well known, Indic religions operate with a cyclical, not a linear, worldview, which implies that there is no such thing as final battles, only indefinite series of 'final battles' within repeated cycles of time (*kalpas*). Within our times, according to Buddhist eschatology, Buddhism will disappear five thousand years after the Buddha's passing away; gradually, people will lose knowledge of the Buddha's teachings (*dharma*). Until the next Buddha (*Maitreya*) appears, human society will degenerate into moral decay and violence. However, the *dharma* is eternal and will thus survive the cycles of the world.

In this regard it is important to note a distinction in Buddhist terminology, between *dharma* and *sasana*. Both is captured in the European term Buddhism, but Buddhists themselves distinguish between *buddhadharma* as eternal teaching and *sasana* (Sinhala: *sasanaya*, Burmese: *thathana*), which refers to the Buddha's dispensation, or Buddhism as manifested and materialised in this world. Myths of decline, but also the necessity of 'protection of the *sasana*' are thus central features of Buddhist teachings and practice. Tropes of decline and deracination have been activated by the monastic community in times of war and political crisis, the Lankan chronicle the *Mahavamsa* being the most famous example, and they came to be activated and expanded upon as part of Buddhist resistance to British colonialism (Turner 2014). Furthermore, decline and disappearance constitute central aspects of early Buddhist historiography, and early Indian Buddhist sources offer various explanations for the decline of Buddhism; scholastic texts tend to understand the decline or even disappearance of Buddhism as "part of an inexorable process, with few or any actors involved in the process" (Nattier 1991: 119), while narratives (*sutras*) tend to explicate decline as the result of human action.[11] Furthermore, early narratives differentiate between internal and external sources of decline: internal sources are identified as laxity of monastic rules, moral decay, and the human

11 By this I refer to both *suttas* in the Pali canon and to Tibetan and Chinese authoritative sources.

incapability to follow the *dharma*,[12] while external sources are identified as foreign invasions and excessive state control. Which actors are to be considered an external threat to Buddhism have—needless to say—been contingent upon historical and political contexts.[13]

3.1 *The Historical Reservoir of anti-Muslim Sentiments*

Most—if not all—anti-Muslim conspiracies in Buddhist societies ultimately evolve around two key themes: the destruction of Buddhism and the triumph of Islam. Thus, anti-Muslim discourses are tied to larger concerns about 'Islamisation' of Buddhist majority societies and subsequent eradication of Buddhism, expressed in what the Burmese scholar Nyi Nyi Kyaw has coined a "myth of deracination" (2016). However, Buddhist notions of 'Otherness' in authoritative texts or doctrinal notions of decline cannot in themselves explain current Islamophobic tendencies. After all, Islam is nearly a millennium younger than Buddhism. The first contact between Buddhists and Muslims took place along the Silk Road, and as Johan Elverskog (2010) has shown, the earliest Buddhist-Muslim encounter was marked by profound cross-cultural exchange. However, this multi-faceted story of exchange, but also competition, has been turned into a one-sided story of Muslim aggression and Buddhist victimhood, which now serves as a historical reservoir of anti-Muslim sentiments that contemporary Buddhist conspiracy theory taps into.

Today, Buddhists often point to the extinction of Buddhism in India in the twelfth century C.E.—symbolised by the Turkish destruction of the Buddhist monastic university of Nalanda—as proof that their fear of Islam today is reasonable. Exactly when the destruction of Nalanda became the symbol of the decline of Buddhism in India is not certain, but it is clear that with British colonial archaeological excavations (begun in 1915) and colonial historiography, knowledge of India's past became accessible to colonial subjects throughout the Empire, including Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and Myanmar (then Burma). It was picked up by Buddhist revivalists and modernist reformers such as Anagarika Dharmapala to champion the Buddhist cause. In a letter written in 1915, Dharmapala states about Islam that "The vestiges of Buddhism were

12 *Saṃyutta-nikāya,* SN 16.13 at SN II 225, 8 to 225. It is stated very clearly that keeping the *dharma* will prolong the *dharma*. Notions of decay are also linked to the very existence of a female monastic order; a traditionalist position in Theravada Buddhism claims that the establishment of a nuns' order would result in the decline of the *sasana*.

13 Nattier explains that "early in the first millennium C.E., however, as the Buddhist community became aware that this initial figure of five hundred years had already passed, new traditions extending the life span of the dharma beyond this limit began to emerge" (1991: 211).

destroyed by this inhuman, barbarous race. Thousands of Bhikkhus were killed, temples were destroyed, libraries were burned and Buddhism dies in India" (Dharmapala 1965: 207). The decline of Buddhism in India, then, was the result of Islamic expansionism, according to Dharmapala. Furthermore, he states that "The Mohammaden, an alien people by Shylockian method, became prosperous like the Jews" (Dharmapala 1965: 207).

It is noteworthy that the point of reference for Dharmapala's anti-Muslim sentiments is not local Buddhist-Muslim interactions, but in fact European (Shakespeare and the Jews). Economic interdependence, as well as competition, has marked the history of Buddhist-Muslim interaction in Ceylon, but the tropes of greediness and prosperity seem to be late nineteenth century imports. Thus, one aspect of today's Buddhist Islamophobia can be traced back to European anti-Semitism: European anti-Semitic ideas about the greedy and prosperous Jew were transferred onto local Muslims in Ceylon. This conflation of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia has a long history in Europe,[14] and was later exported throughout the British Empire—including Ceylon—informing Buddhist reformers such as Dharmapala.[15] As research of Buddhist modernism has shown, the dark side of Buddhist anti-colonial revivalism was the exclusion of not only Christianity (as the colonial religion), but also other non-Buddhist religions, such as Hinduism and Islam (Holt 2016).

British colonialism also had a deep impact on Buddhist-Muslim relations in Burma, but in Burma this took the form of severe anti-Indian and anti-Muslim riots in the 1920s and 1930s. In the transnational British colonial economy, workers were moved from India to other parts of the empire, resulting in a large population of Indian workers in colonial and cosmopolitan Rangoon. The Indian political and economic dominance during British rule eventually resulted in Burmese Buddhist resentment and a 'colonial trauma', which help explain certain xenophobic tendencies in Buddhist majority society in the post-colonial period, particularly against Burmese Indians (Egreteau 2011).[16] Furthermore, this has been nurtured and exploited by subsequent political and military leaders in post-independence Burma.

14 For example, Muslims were identified with the imaginary people referred to as 'Red Jews' who in German sources (dated between 1200–1600) functioned as the epochal threat to Christianity (Gow 1994).

15 Anagarika Dharmapala was under strong European and North American influence: through a British schooling system in Ceylon, as well as through contact with Madam Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott of the Theosophical Society. To what extent Blavatsky's racial teachings informed Dharmapala's views on Jews and Muslims needs further research.

16 Still, hundreds of thousands of Burmese of Indian background enjoy only limited citizenship rights.

In fact, there is a historical legacy of Islamophobia that can be traced back to the early days of the military regime. The regime of General Ne Win (1962–1988) actively engaged in politics of fear to legitimise the regime. For example, the Immigration Department in the early 1980s produced anti-Muslim material. Over the past decades, the anti-Indian rhetoric and anti-Indian state policies (in terms of citizenship laws and nationalisation programs) have taken a clearer anti-Muslim turn, while other Burmese Indian communities of Sikh, Hindu, or Christian background face less discrimination today (Egreteau 2011). During the years of military regime it was the military state—and not Buddhist groups—who made active use of anti-Muslim sentiments,[17] tapping into conspiracies about a Muslim invasion from neighbouring India and Bangladesh. In the Myanmar case therefore, we see how conspiracy theories can be used as a modality of power for authoritarian regimes, not unlike autocratic regimes in the Arab world (Gray 2010).

At the folk level, Asbjørn Dyrendal (2016) notes, conspiracy 'theory' tends to live as a set of loosely related notions of agents involved in evil action, often for nebulous, but inner-motivated, reasons. Such dispersed notions of Muslim 'evilness' can be identified in Burmese lullabies (for example that the *kalar*—a pejorative term for Muslims—are bogeymen[18]), or in popular notions in Sri Lanka of Muslim economic protectionism and world economic leadership through the halal-certification system. Furthermore, Dyrendal, observes, the semi-coherent theories are the work of "conspiracy experts." Conspiracy rumours tend to stay at the level of experts and interest groups, and only later, when the most common memes are used actively, a deeper commitment to a broader, specific theory may be adopted (Dyrendal 2016: 201).

Exactly how the dispersed anti-Muslim memes of stereotypes and conspiracy rumours came to be integrated into fully fledged theory about a Global Islamic Governance as we see it today remains so far obscure, but analysis of sermons, press statements, or postings on social media all indicate that 969/MaBaTha and BBS monks are crucial producers and transmitters of Buddhist conspiracy theory about Islam. The 969/MaBaTha and the BBS conspiracy theories fit into traditional conspiracy groups in that they are radical 'nativists' whose enemy is an evil, subversive power from the outside that has undermined true values and stolen away power and freedom from the ingroup (confer Dyrendal 2016; Gardell 2003). Conspiracy theories serve as explanations of the world's fallen state, but are in themselves unredemptive. Furthermore,

17 The Buddhist order of monks and nuns, as well as lay Buddhist organisations, was under strict military regulation and surveillance between 1962 and 2011.

18 Field notes and interviews, February 2014.

they require particular forms of action to rectify what has gone wrong, by mobilising ignorant outsiders of the same ethnicity or religious background. The achievement of a Right Buddhist Social Order requires agency and 'awakening' of the unknowing majority. This has been transmitted to the general public through sermons, temple networks, social media, or through spectacles (such as public rallies, or even attacks on mosques) in public space. In addition, the actors engage in legal activism to protect Buddhism and to impose restrictions on Muslim religious practice. Such Buddhist legal activism has so far been most successful in Myanmar where, as we have seen, the 969/MaBaTha succeeded in pushing through the four laws to "protect race and religion."

4 Buddhist Tropes of Global Islamic Expansion

Contemporary Buddhist theories about an Islamic conspiracy to govern the world relate to Buddhist eschatology, calls for protection of the *sasana*, anti-colonial tropes, myths of deracination, and, in the case of Myanmar, what the Burmese military government produced of anti-Muslim propaganda to consolidate its power. As the analysis below will show, old and new, local and global concerns and issues are interwoven into one, coherent narrative of Islamic expansionism. Furthermore, a close look at anti-Muslim conspiracies reveals that such discourses operate at different levels, serving various interests and concerns: some discourses relate to local business competition, while others portray Muslims and Islam as a security threat to the state.

In the following, I analyse six central tropes in Buddhist theories of a global Islamic conspiracy. The first two—Muslim minorities as local representatives of global conspiratorial forces and Islam as a security threat—are interconnected and concern majority-minority relations, national identities, and transnational religious networks as threat to the modern nation state. The third trope concerns capitalism and market competition, while the latter three consider another aspect of global Islamophobic discourses, namely that there is a plot to spread Islam around the world through population growth, or so-called Demographic Jihad. This in turn can be divided into three subfields according to the means by which Muslims are claimed to use in their Demographic Jihad to eradicate Buddhism: 'Birth Jihad', 'Rape Jihad', and 'Love Jihad'.

4.1 *Local Muslims as Representatives of Global Conspiratorial Forces*

Theravada Buddhism's close relations with the Burmese and Sri Lankan state have made it an ally to modern ethno-nationalism in both countries. Furthermore, Buddhism is identified with the majority ethnic group to the extent that

religious minority identities are often represented as non-national. In spite of a long tradition of peaceful interaction and co-existence (particularly prior to European colonialism), Buddhist conspiracy theories are built on a narrative of an inherent Buddhist-Muslim conflict, which excludes narratives of co-existence, tolerance, and inclusion. At the heart of such conspiracies is the idea that Muslims do not belong to the national community, thus representing something foreign, although the majority of the various Muslim populations in Sri Lanka and Myanmar have been living in these Buddhist majority societies for centuries.[19] Thus, in comparison to Islamophobic discourses in Europe, Buddhist fears of Islam cannot be explained as the result of recent migration and refugee crisis, although the Rohingya issue in Myanmar bears some resemblance to the situation in Europe.

One prominent discourse found in both 969/MaBaTha and BBS material deals with issues of cultural diversity, citizenship, and human rights, portraying Buddhists as 'hosts' and Muslims as 'guests', only accredited with limited minority rights. For example, in public speeches in Colombo during 2013, the BBS argued that it was a global principle that minorities must reside in a country in a way that does not threaten the majority race and its identity, and, moreover, that the Muslims were ungrateful to their Sinhala Buddhist hosts. In an interview in 2014, BBS Chief Executive Officer Dilanthe Withanage claimed that "It is the Sinhala Buddhists who are in danger. We are the ones who live in fear. Our Sinhala Buddhist leaders are helpless due to the vast powers of these so-called minorities."[20] Moreover, during sermons, BBS monks have claimed that Muslims in Sri Lanka are like 'greedy ghosts' threatening the majority race and its identity. Such rhetoric neglects Sinhala Buddhists' thousand-year-long peaceful coexistence with the ethnically and linguistically diverse Muslim communities of Sri Lanka.

In Burmese Buddhist discourse, but increasingly also in BBS understanding, the Rakhine state, which borders the populous Muslim state of Bangladesh, is glossed as a frontier state between two distinguishable and separate worlds of Buddhism and Islam. The 969 spokesperson U Wirathu is also closely related to Arakanese Buddhist nationalist organisations in the Rakhine state such as the Arakan Human Rights and Development Organization (AHRDO) and has contributed financially to their report on the conflict in Rakhine state published in 2013. (AHRDO 2013). This report questions the suffering of the Muslim Rohingya population and claims that the real victims are the Rakhine Buddhists. Furthermore, the report claims that "The Muslims are beholden

19 The Muslim communities in Sri Lanka, for example, date back to the 9th century.

20 Bodu Bala Sena website, http://www.bodubalasena.org. Accessed 12/03/17.

to the insular dictates of their faiths, which does not encourage assimiliation … but upholds expansionism, superiority"(AHRDO 2013: 19). The AHRDO goes on to claim that the Rohingya will establish "a purely Islamic land … cleansed of infidels" (AHRDO 2013: 51). To substantiate this claim, the report points to Pakistan, Libya, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia and argues that local armed groups among the Rohingyas are trained by al-Qaida (82).[21] Also, the report argues that the Rohingya claim for citizenship is just a means towards establishing an independent Islamic state.[22] The notion of Rakhine as a frontier state is also echoed at the government level; according to the information minister of the semi-civilian Thein Sein government, for example, the only hindrance to make a continuous 'green belt' of Islam from Saudi Arabia to the Philippines is in fact Myanmar.[23]

4.2 *Islam as Security Threat*

Although Buddhist-Muslim coexistence in Sri Lanka is the rule rather than the exception, in Buddhist conspiracy thinking, local Muslims are seen as a threat to national security. While local political contexts are of paramount importance for understanding Buddhist Islamophobia, so too are the global processes that inform the discursive strategies and practices of these movements. Fuelled by new forms of communication, worldwide concerns over the rise of global jihadism, and the subsequent securitisation of Islam, local Muslims in Buddhist societies are increasingly portrayed as a threat to national security. Muslim associations are seen as representatives of international terrorist networks and local agents of Islamic global imperialism. Leading monks have called mosques "enemy bases," and they have identified the niqab as a direct threat to the state and its territory. The BBS, for example, has published posters that show the island of Sri Lanka as a niqab-dressed woman with evil-red eyes, symbolically identifying the niqab as a direct security threat to the state and its territory.

These posters follow a historical pattern of cartographic representations of the island in which the conflicting parties during the war used such depictions either to promote their own national identity, or to scare people off by enemy symbols. Previously, Sinhala Buddhist patriotic movements had shown the island with a Tiger (the symbol of the LTTE, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

21 It should be noted that like numerous ethnic minority groups in Myanmar, both the Rohingyas and the Arakanese Buddhists have armed groups that since the creation of Burma have fought the Burmese central government in Yangon.

22 1.2 million Rohingyas are denied citizenship in Myanmar and live as stateless persons in the north of the Rakhine state, bordering Bangladesh.

23 Interview with the then Information Minister U Ye Thu, June, 2016, Oslo.

Eelam), pointing to a future in which the LTTE not only controlled parts of the island, but in fact the entire island, including Sinhala majority areas. Sri Lanka as an evil-red niqab-dressed woman follows a particular visual culture that expresses majority fears of extinction, or deracination, by a minority group. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that in post-war Sri Lanka, Islam fills an ideological vacuum in Sinhala nationalism after the defeat of the Tamil Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009: Islam has replaced the LTTE as the significant 'Other' in Sinhala nationalist ideology.

Buddhist conspiracy theorists have garnered unexpected support by successfully interweaving local concerns with international alarmism. Such global concerns are reproduced to fit local-level social and political contexts. In this process, global discourses on terror seem to be a convenient myth in local competition for power and resources. As previously discussed, Rohingya militant groups in Rakhine are accused of international jihadist connections, even though Rohingya militancy rather must be understood in the local context of ethnic minority resistance to internal Burmese colonialism and state repression.

4.3 *Islamic Economic Expansionism*

One crucial, but all too often neglected aspect of Buddhist anti-Muslim discourses, relates to the economic sphere. Following similar anti-Semitic tropes of Jewish world economic dominance, Buddhist Islamophobic discourses often express grievances about alleged Muslim exploitation of the ethnic majority, trade monopolies, and transnational trade networks (Schontal 2016).[24]

In Sri Lanka, the BBS monks have been particularly concerned with halal certification and slaughter, and in 2013 one BBS monk even went so far as to self-immolate over the halal issue, the first self-immolation by a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka's history, testifying to the heated debate over halal that surprisingly erupted in 2012. Animal rights are certainly high on the Buddhist agenda (not only among radical political Buddhists), but a closer analysis of the halal controversy in Sri Lanka shows that protection of animals—and the cow in particular—only tells us parts of this story.[25] At a press conference in Colombo in 2012, the chief monk of the BBS, Ven. Gnanissara, raised the specific issue of Sinhala-Buddhist business competition, claiming that the

24 As pointed out by Holt (2016), the theme of Muslim exploitation of the rural poor was also prevalent prior to the anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka in 1915.

25 It is beyond the scope here to discuss the cow protection movement, but it should be noted that although the cow has always been important to rural Sri Lanka, cow protection has taken on a political aspect and is related to the strongly anti-Muslim cow protectionist movements in India.

halal-certification system implied unfair treatment of Sinhala shopkeepers as Muslims then would boycott shops with no halal certification. "This is a Sinhala Buddhist country," Ven. Gnanissara argued, "from ancient times the Sinhalese have dominated and assisted the business society to build up and carry out their business. Now these businesses are threatened by these Muslims with the halal symbol and certification just so they could make a business out of it."[26] Furthermore, BBS monks claimed that lay offerings (*dana*) to Buddhist temples contained goods with halal stamps on them, making the offerings less pure.

Thus high on the Buddhist political agenda in Sri Lanka we find Sinhala-Muslim economic competition, specifically between producers of non-halal and halal food items, product locations in the supermarket shelves, and the extent to which one could offer Buddhist monks food items with halal certification on them. In fact, the BBS explicitly addresses the concerns of the Sinhala business community. It should also be noted that there have been several attacks on Muslim-owned slaughterhouses, supermarkets, and shops.

Similarly, in Myanmar's environment of rapid economic liberalisation and foreign investment, Buddhist monks, like U Wirathu, have explicitly asked Burmese Buddhists to be loyal to the "Golden Burmese" by buying their goods from Buddhist traders only. During the height of the 969, in 2012, Yangon's market stalls were decorated with 969 stickers, indicating to the customers that the vendors were Buddhists. The very name of 969 could be read as a direct response to what is perceived as Muslim economic protectionism, expressed in the 786 symbol. Moreover, Buddhist monks asked the Buddhist public not to buy products from the Qatar-based telecom company Ooredoo when it established itself in Myanmar in 2012. This kind of protectionism has not come to the fore for example, in relation to the Norwegian-owned Telenor, which dominates the Myanmar telecom market. Thus, foreign investment and trade are perceived as a greater threat when perceived as representing 'Muslim international trade', compared to companies operating from secular/Christian backgrounds.

To what extent business competition can explain anti-Muslim violence, for example in Meiktila in 2013, is an open question. On the one hand, the strongest economic threat to the Burmese Buddhist business community is not the Muslims, but the Chinese, who have not (yet) been attacked. On the other hand, the conflict in Meiktila started as a dispute in a gold shop and involved (in its earliest phases) local actors who had ongoing disputes with the Muslim gold

26 "Bodu Bala Sena press conference on halal certification," 2012 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeJY0WkDVXU&t=1057s. Accessed 20/02/2012.

shop owner and local Muslim taxi drivers.[27] Meiktila is an important location on the trading route between Mandalay and Yangon, and the severe destruction brought upon the Muslim communities there had a damaging effect on Muslim trade in the region. Similarly, Muslim shops were burnt to the ground during the anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka in 2014. Thus, although establishing a causal link between economic competition and anti-Muslim violence is difficult, a consequence of Buddhist-Muslim violent conflict has nonetheless been a weakening of Muslim businesses.

4.4 *Jihad Through Birth*

Changing global demographics and the expected increase in the Muslim population worldwide is another issue of concern to anti-Muslim Buddhist groups. While according to census data there is no significant increase in the Muslim populations of Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the alleged growth of the Muslim population is of utmost importance to 969/MaBaTha and the BBS as an increase in the Muslim population is perceived as an existential threat to Buddhism as a social and cultural phenomenon in the world. The BBS argues that Buddhist societies will eventually turn Muslim, not only through external pressure but from changing ratios of Muslims and Buddhists in the population. It is then assumed that this population will be Wahabist and/or jihadist in nature.

To prevent "Buddhists from becoming minority in their own country", radical Buddhist groups have called for family planning policies, even legal regulation of women's reproductive health. As noted above, at the BBS inaugural meeting in 2012, BBS leaders demanded the government shut down all family planning units in the country so that Sinhala women could produce more babies. Finally, the BBS expressed a concern that a decline in the Sinhala Buddhist population would imply a drop in the number of monastic recruits, as small families are less likely to donate one out of perhaps two children of a small family unit to the order.

In 2012/2013, spurious allegations surfaced accusing Muslim shopkeepers of distributing sweets containing sterilising medications to Sinhala Buddhist women. This seems to be a reversed 'Birth rate Jihad' conspiracy, which follows a standard scheme of Muslim males tricking Buddhist women, but which deviates from the standard version of aggressive male sexuality. While it is tempting to rest with an instrumentalist explanation that this is only a wicked trick in local business competition, this trope points to something much

27 Interviews with Buddhist monks in Meiktila who were engaged in humanitarian assistance of the Muslim and Buddhist communities suffering from the violence, May 2015.

larger, namely the alleged decline in the Sinhala Buddhist population and the increase in the Muslim population. While religious demographic competition is crucial to Buddhist conspiracy theories, I have not been able to identify this conspiracy rumour of Muslim sterilisation of Buddhist women elsewhere, although it should be noted that the general topic is recurrent in conspiracy rumour elsewhere, for example in Nigeria concerning Western sterilisation of Muslims through polio vaccines (for example Samba *et al.* 2004; Kaler 2009).

4.5 *Rape Jihad*

The trope of 'demographic jihad' emphasises the (alleged) growth in the Muslim population, either in absolute numbers through high birth rates, or in relative numbers through decline in the Buddhist population. A connected, but slightly different aspect of this, is the trope of jihad through rape. Here the emphasis is not on the possibility of Muslim reproduction through rape, but on the violation of the Buddhist female body. When violence erupted in the Rakhine state in 2012, between Muslim Rohingyas and Arakanese Buddhists, this came after allegations of rape and murder of a local Buddhist girl by three Muslim men. The rape and death of Thida Htway was soon turned into a symbol of what was now portrayed as general male Muslim aggression against Buddhist women, turning the female Buddhist body into an object for Buddhist nationalism. Pictures of Thida Htway´s dead body also feature in the aforementioned report by the AHRDO and even on posters on U Wirathu's temple wall in Mandalay.[28]

While the nexus between rape allegations and anti-Muslim violence is hard to prove, several scholars have observed how U Wirathu has posted reports of alleged rape of Buddhist women by Muslim males prior to incidents of communal violence, for example before the violence in Meiktila in 2013 and the violence in Mandalay in June 2014. U Wirathu has shown a particular concern for these rape cases; he has even carried out his own investigations about rape in Myanmar. His conclusion is that all rape cases in Myanmar are carried out by Muslims. According to U Wirathu: "There are lots of difficulties due to the Muslims, they cause problems. They rape Burmese Buddhist women in many towns and cities. They rape teenagers and children under age."[29]

Sexuality and reproduction are core themes in Buddhist conspiracy theory about Islam. Like in Hindu nationalism, women are portrayed as passive and innocent victims and female bodies are considered as markers of communal identities. This theme is also prevalent in European Islamophobic discourses,

28 Field notes, June 2014 and June 2015.

29 Interview with author, translated from English to Burmese, Mandalay, June 1, 2015.

for example in Stop Islamisation of Norway (SIAN), which portrays Islam as an imminent threat to (relative) gender equality. In addition, there is also a very specific ultra-nationalist gender politics at work, wherein the 'Muslim invaders' are portrayed as a "hypermasculine violent threat to white and virtuous Norwegian females left unprotected by Norwegian men emasculated by state feminism" (Bangstad 2016: 161). State feminism is far from the issue in Myanmar, but the trope of hypermasculinity and violent intrusion is similar. At one level, one could read the importance of rape in Buddhist protectionist discourse as a metaphor for what many Buddhists in Myanmar see as a Muslim intrusion from the outside into a country that was closed from the outside world for more than fifty years, and which the monks themselves consider to be the Buddhist heartland. Furthermore, when allegations of rape occur in Rakhine, it functions as a catalyst for geopolitics in the region regarding stateless persons, illegal immigration, refugees, and border disputes between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Connected to the notion of 'rape jihad', then, is the notion of Rakhine as a frontier state between the Muslim Bangladesh and the Buddhist Myanmar. Rape of Buddhist women in Rakhine by Muslim men (who are seen as illegal immigrants) is seen as indicative of Muslim expansionism into the pure Buddhist heartland.

4.6 *Love Jihad*

Another aspect of the alleged Islamisation of Buddhist women relates to Buddhist-Muslim marriages and the idea that Muslim males force their Buddhist spouses to become Muslim. 'Love Jihad' refers to a claimed Islamist conspiracy whereby Muslim men trick non-Muslim women into marriage as a means to spread Islam and is seen as a tool for Islamisation of Buddhist women by their Muslim husbands. From this perspective, mixed marriages are conceptualised as a means of conversion and thus represent a danger to the very survival of Buddhism.

This trope also contains claims of Muslim male aggression, but differs from rape jihad in that it nurtures a picture of Muslim men as Janus-faced: on the surface the ordinary Muslim men might be gentle and generous, but once marriage is a reality the hidden evil nature of Muslim men will surface. For example, according to U Wirathu, Buddhist women are allured into marrying Muslim men, and once married they are forced to convert to Islam:

> The women are very vulnerable (in marriage). The man pretends to be Buddhist, and then she is allured into Islam and she is forced to wear burqa. Some women are tortured if she continues the practices of her religion. If she is pregnant, she will be mistreated until miscarriage.

> In one case, a woman was even killed. If a woman of another religion marries a Muslim man she loses all her religious freedom and all her human rights … Then they are forced to commit sacrilege, for example to step on Buddha images. They force Buddhist women to sin … When we as monks give sermons we inform laypeople about these stories so that they can shy away from Muslim males.[30]

Crucial to the narrative of Buddhist-Muslim marriage is Muslim male aggression, and the 969 has organised a series of public events to document such cases, through presentation of "real life stories." In such events, the identified Buddhist victim is interviewed by a Buddhist monk in front of a Buddhist audience.

One such event was written down and published in the form of a booklet that was distributed by U Wirathu and his monastic and lay supports in Mandalay during 2013 and 2014.[31] In this text we are introduced to a story called "The victim's voice who just escaped from Tigers," which relates how a Burmese Buddhist woman called Ma War War Myint left her Muslim husband. Her story—a testimony of severe domestic violence—is framed within a Buddhist-Muslim dichotomy and conceptualised as a case of violations of the right to freedom of religion and violations of women's rights. In the text, a binary dichotomy is constructed: 'Islam–violence–unfree' versus 'Buddhism–non-violence–freedom'. In this narrative of violence and suffering, Buddhist monks are portrayed as rescuers of women who escape religious persecution, which can be said to represent a new dimension of the monastic role. Finally, 'Muslim' is referred to in the pejorative 'dark' (*kalar*) and juxtaposed to being a Myanmar citizen, underscoring the anomalous position of Muslims in the Buddhist Right Social Order as expressed in Buddhist conspiracy theory.

5 Political Contexts of Buddhist Islamophobia

Why did the new anti-Muslim Buddhist protectionist movements come to surface at this particular point in time? As previously discussed, anti-Muslim sentiments filled an ideological vacuum in post-war Sri Lanka. Furthermore, anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence clearly serves national political interests.

30 Personal interview, translated from Burmese to English, June 1, 2015.

31 Her story was recorded at a public meeting on October 22, 2012 and published in *Human Rights Violations by Human Rights Activist,* pamphlet circulated by U Wirathu in Mandalay during 2014. Undated.

The authoritarian Rajapaksa regime (2005–2015) in Sri Lanka built its legitimacy around victory in the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) under the banner of Buddhist protectionism. Buttressed by the regime's protective wings, various Buddhist protectionist groups, among them the BBS, came into being, and thrived.

In Myanmar, the political context was different, as anti-Muslim sentiments flourished under political liberalisation and transition towards democracy. During the years of the military-dominated transitional regime (2011–2016) the 969/MaBaTha received tacit support from the State Sangha Maha Nayaka (a state body to oversee the Sangha in Myanmar), as well as protection and support from the regime. For example, it was President Thein Sein who issued a ban on the *Time* issue featuring U Wirathu, calling him a good son of the Buddha. Therefore, the 'evil state' of the military regime was commonly seen as the source of anti-Muslim attacks, implying politically orchestrated violence between different religious communities. This violence benefits authoritarian regimes by giving them an excuse for curfews or even military intervention.

Political parties also deliberately use Buddhist concerns and hate speech against religious minorities to gain votes among religious majorities. Such processes were discernible in Myanmar prior to the 2015 elections. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) formed various alliances with the 969/MaBaTha monks and strongly backed the monks' laws "to protect race and religion." USDP politicians likewise donated large sums to high-ranking 969/MaBaTha monks during the election campaign, while MaBaTha circulated flyers encouraging voters to vote for parties (most importantly the USDP) that supported their laws preventing Islamisation. Also, one could argue that the idea discussed above of a 'green belt' of Islamic expansionism pressing its way through Myanmar—embodied and materialised as 'illegal immigration' from Bangladesh—plays a particular role in the current political transition. The 969/MaBaTha concern for Rakhine conflates Arakanese and Burmese Buddhist nationalisms, ignoring centuries old Arakanese Buddhist resistance to Burmese Buddhist rule. In this respect, ethnic difference among Buddhists in Myanmar is downplayed while boundaries based on religious difference are intensified.

However, after Aung San Suu Kyi's electoral victory in 2015 the political climate for Buddhist protectionist movements has changed again. The MaHaNa sought to distance itself as the tide of the public opinion started to turn against these movements. In 2017 after numerous controversial statements, including public support to the assassins of U Ko Ni (the country's leading constitutional lawyer who also happened to be Muslim), the MaHaNa banned U Wirathu from preaching for a year (Htun 2017).

Although the political contexts in Sri Lanka and Myanmar are very different, it remains a fact that there are strong connections between authoritarian regimes and Buddhist groups and actors that transmit conspiracy theories. It should also be noted that in many post-colonial fragile (or even failed) states, rumours and conspiracies form part of ordinary political life. During military rule in Myanmar in particular, hearsay (*kola-ha*) was (and to some extent still is) the main form of political communication among state agents, political leaders, and the public. As elite politics is marked by secrecy and corruption, conspiracy theory about hidden plots and plans of the political and economic elites is considered a legitimate form of knowledge. When conspiracy theory is directed against minorities with little or no political influence (but occasionally economic power) it no longer functions as legitimate critique of power, but rather as a scapegoating strategy for the majority. In the early years of the 969 and the MaBaTha, it was inconceivable to many pro-democracy activists that Buddhist monks, who were held in such high esteem, could engage in hate speech against Muslims. Therefore, an explanation given for the rise of 969 and the MaBaTha in 2013 and 2014 was that these groups were created by the military itself. What we see then is a Buddhist conspiracy theory about hidden military plot to create Buddhist anti-Muslim conspiracy theory about global Islamic expansion. While research on the roots of the 969 movement indicate the involvement of military personnel in the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Frydenlund 2017; Kyaw 2016), as well as 969/MaBaTha-military relations, it is all too simplistic to reduce this to a military conspiracy to undermine civil society and democratic forces in Myanmar.

6 Conclusion: Global Islamophobia and Its Buddhist Vicissitudes

In many regards, the BBS and the 969/MaBaTha fit the classic pattern of neotraditionalism (or fundamentalism) here defined as the wish to work against the institutional differentiation brought about by colonial rule, modernity, and secularisation. As such, all three of them fit a classic pattern of Buddhist protectionist movements, which thrive in times of rapid social and political change and subsequent ontological insecurity. There are, however, some important developments compared to previous movements. First, the new Buddhist protectionist movements have Islam and Muslims as their main 'Other', and to a much lesser extent Christianity. Second, the current rise in global Islamophobia also informs local expressions of Buddhist Islamophobia; new social media allows for a rapid transmission of tropes and themes in what can been seen as a global Islamophobic intertextuality. Third, unlike previous movements, which were

closely attached to ethno-nationalism and state-building in the post-colonial era, the new protectionist movements are more outward looking. It is my contention that these groups represent a novelty in that they transcend boundaries of the nation-state. The early stages of this process are seen in a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by BBS and 969 in Colombo in 2014. According to the MoU there are "subtle incursions taking place under the guise of secular, multicultural, and other liberal notions … funded from overseas … subtly spreading into local situations" (*Colombo Telegraph* 2014). Thus, there is not only a global Islamic conspiracy to undermine Buddhism, but also a global liberal and secular order that will assist the growth of non-Buddhist religions—that is, Islam. The future strength of these collaborative efforts is still unclear, but the MoU's signing indicates a stronger recognition of shared Buddhist political interests across the region. It also indicates a move from locally embedded ethnoreligious identities to a more clearly defined regional Buddhist political identity, which imbues their anti-Muslim message with greater importance as well as urgency.

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CHAPTER 13

Islamism and the Instrumentalisation of Conspiracism

Willow J. Berridge

1 Introduction

Although Islamist ideology takes many diverse forms, one common feature shared by many different Islamist groups is the use of conspiracist language. The Shia militants of Khomeini's Iran, radical Muslim Brothers in Egypt such as Sayyid Qutb, and the radical Islamists of the Sahwa (Awakening) movement in Saudi Arabia have all portrayed themselves as being locked in a Manichaean duel against those who seek to conspire against Islam. Given the prevalence of conspiracist discourses within Islamist ideology, it is perhaps surprising that there have been relatively few efforts to analyse this phenomenon with reference to a broader literature on conspiracy theory. The best known text on the subject is still Daniel Pipes' *The Hidden Hand: Middle Eastern Fears of Conspiracy* (1996). Given that Pipes is well established as a neoconservative voice on Middle Eastern affairs and anti-Islamist polemicist, it is perhaps unsurprising that the text follows the conservative trend within conspiracy theory analysis of treating its subject matter as a product of purely pathological thinking. It is only recently that Matthew Gray's research on conspiracism within the Arab world has rejected Pipes' characterisation of Middle Eastern conspiracy theories as irrational, stressing a much wider and more complex range of factors that have contributed to the proliferation of conspiracy narratives. These include the prevalence of actual conspiracies, such as the British and US-backed coup against Mohammad Mossadeq, the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, in 1953; an increasing gulf between state and society that encourages conspiracist thinking as a means of challenging the hegemony of state narratives; conspiracism's entry into an 'ideological vacuum' created by the failure of the Middle Eastern governments to imbue their people with a meaningful set of ideas following the waning of Arab nationalism; and the informal character of politics in the region, which leaves much room for speculation over the motives behind particular government initiatives (Gray 2010).

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Following Gray (2010: 53–74), this chapter will locate the Islamist tendency towards conspiracy within the context of a substantial gulf between state and society within the Islamic world. Jean-François Bayart has observed that the state elites in sub-Saharan Africa have pursued a policy of "extraversion," seeking to empower themselves economically and politically by "mobilizing resources derived from their (possibly unequal) relationship with the outside environment" (Bayart 1993: 21–24; 2000: 218). Much the same could be observed of the state elites in post-colonial and Muslim countries beyond sub-Saharan Africa. It was Frantz Fanon, the Martinican psychiatrist and partisan of the Algerian independence struggle who is held to have influenced a number of late twentieth century Islamist ideologues (Davari 2014; Berridge, 2017),[1] who lamented the social divide between the colonial masses and the "national bourgeoisie." This national bourgeoisie, according to Fanon, "turns its back more and more on the interior and on the real facts of its underdeveloped country, and tends to look towards the former mother country and the foreign capitalists who count on its obliging compliance" (Fanon 1967: 133). Thus, this chapter will contend that although Islamist conspiracism roots itself in a highly essentialist reading of Islamic history, it is able to popularise its binary perception of the world because it—often quite pragmatically—exploits a state-society rift that is a specific feature of colonial and post-colonial modernity.

2 Islamist Conspiracism's Ideological Roots

The ideological origins of Islamist conspiracism are contentious, largely because the ideological origins of Islamism itself are subject to much debate. While many scholars prefer to see the 'Islamic Revival' as a reassertion of historic cultural values that had been submerged by the onset of colonial modernity (Milton-Edwards 2008: 444–445, 458–460), other commentators characterise Islamism as a product of its time, a regional offshoot of the modern, 'totalitarian' ideologies of the twentieth century, such as fascism and Marxism-Leninism (Gallab 2008; Roy 1996). What might be said is that Islamist conspiracism mimics forms of conspiracism found in other ideologies, in that it relates the battle between conspiracy and truth to a Manichaean duel between dialectically opposed forces (Choueiri 2010: 119–120). The cultural and intellectual reference points upon which it draws, nevertheless, are specific to Islamic civilisation.

1 This was in spite of the fact that Fanon himself was wary of the reactionary potential of religious ideology. See Hudis (2015: 134).

Anti-Semitic conspiracism has been a recurring feature of communist, fascist, and Islamist rhetoric. Indeed, a number of Islamism's most vocal critics have made the claim that its fantasies of a global Jewish conspiracy are essentially derived from fascist ideas, contending that controversial Nazi ally and Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj al-Amin al-Husseini, passed on the belief system of his German mentors to the Muslim Brothers he influenced (for example, Kuntzel 2003). Yet, Islamist anti-Semitism usually possessed its own internal logic. For instance, Muslim Brotherhood periodicals during the Palestine Revolt of the 1930s, which fanned the flames of regional Arab-Jewish tension, contained frequent hostile references to Jews but supported them with references to Quranic verses rather than Nazi racial theory (Lia 2006: 246). Even Sayyid Qutb, one of the most vocal propagators of the 'Jewish conspiracy', anchored his vision of a binary conflict between Judaism in Islam in what Stoica calls "a veritable hermeneutics of conspiracy" (Stoica 2014: 111). In *Ma'arakatuna ma' al-Yahud* (Our battle with the Jews), he traces the origins of what he perceives to be the pernicious Jewish campaign against Islam to its dawn in the seventh century, arguing that Jews had plotted against the Islamic community since the days in which it was first established in Medina (cited in Stoica 2014). This distinguishes Qutb from a number of fascist ideologues who perceive Jewish conspiracies to be more modern in origin (Stoica 2014). It is worth observing that where Islamists do borrow from Western anti-Semitism, it is often the premodern rhetoric that they turn to. For instance, Iranian propaganda rehashed medieval European visions of Jews using the blood of non-Jewish children to help them prepare the unleavened bread eaten during Passover (Jaspal 2015).

There is an interesting parallel here with the conspiratorial narratives that Qutb and other radicals constructed to caricature opponents from Christian backgrounds. Rather than condemning the post-Enlightenment pseudoscientific racism or the utilitarian concepts that underpinned the 'civilising mission', Islamist conspiracists envisaged colonial and neo-colonial projects as a form of crusaderism, and frequently depicted Christian institutions rather than the secular statesmen at the head of the European colonial order as the principle architects of the campaign against Islam (Choueiri 2010: 119–120). Qutb, for instance, wrote that Western imperialism in its post-Enlightenment form represented "a camouflage concealing the crusading spirit which is no longer capable of appearing in its true colours as it used to during the Middle Ages" (Qutb 1981: 202; quoted in Choueiri 2010: 119). What is interesting is that terms such as 'Crusaders' (*al-Salibiyyun*) or 'Crusader Wars' (*al-hurub al-salibiyya*) have only appeared relatively recently in Middle Eastern political discourse, and for the purpose of characterising Western interventionism. Although the source of the conspiracy is modern, therefore, it is articulated

using a fresh interpretation of historical conflicts (Gray 2010: 52). Transnational militant organisations such as al-Qaeda have carried this emphasis on Crusaderism into the conspiracist discourses of the present day (Gray 2010: 154).

Islamists often employ a reductionist vision of Islamic history to legitimise their campaign for a renewed Islamic order, and narratives of an all-encompassing conspiracy dating back to the seventh century can aid this ideologisation of the historical record. Let us take, for example, the writings of the Saudi Salafi and Islamist Safar al-Hawali, who documents the "Conspiracy against Islam," (*Mu'amira ala al-Islam*) in extensive detail on his personal website (Al-Hawali n.d.). Safar al-Hawali accrued particular prominence in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s as an architect of the Sahwa movement identifying with the eighteenth-century religious revivalist Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, although his movement was also likely influenced by more contemporary Islamist and Salafi ideals. Salafism as a contemporary ideology seeks to purify Islam from the cultural and religious 'innovations' that accrued to it in the era that followed the age of Muhammad and the Rightly Guided Caliphs in the seventh century. As such, its binary worldview seeks to reverse the dynamic of accommodation and cultural syncretism that has underpinned the religious and cultural expansion of Islam throughout over 1,300 years of history, as well as to subsume the many and diverse interpretations of Islam that have emerged since this point into a single, unified doctrine.[2]

Since al-Hawali's rhetoric attempts, in a reductionist fashion, to characterise a complex variety of cultural, intellectual, and religious transformations as manifestations of a Manichaean duel between the 'true' faith and the evil that confronts it, the "Conspiracy against Islam" that he identifies is simultaneously holistic and inchoate. Jews, Shias (or *Rafidis*, in al-Hawali's language), Zoroastrians (*al-Majusiyya*), and even adherents of historically more liberal schools of Islamic theology such as *al-Batiniyya* are all part of a single conspiracy. Rather than identifying a single organisation or covert society that organises the conspiracy, al-Hawali repeatedly falls back upon the phrase "enemies of Islam." In many regards, his conspiracism is distinct from that of contemporary Western ideologues, in that he makes little effort to uncover details of secret plotting, clandestine meetings and the like. Instead, the various co-conspirators collaborate in a more metaphysical sense. The conspiracy against Islam, al-Hawali explains, is another by-product of the struggle between good and evil (*al-haqq wa'l-batil*), which he traces back to the dawn of Islam itself. When God sent the Prophet Muhammad to take up the cause of good, he was confronted by a

2 For a discussion of the evolution of Salafi ideology and the terminology surrounding it, see Lauziere (2016).

number of enemies of Islam, including the Jews and polytheists of Medina, who sought to thwart his mission, and subsequently in the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs those who sought to empower the family of the Prophet (who would later be termed the Shia) further contributed to the conspiracy (Al-Hawali n.d.).

Broader processes of cultural integration and syncretism perceived to have diluted genuine Islam are also attributed to this over-arching conspiracy. One example is al-Hawali's depiction of the generations of former Sassanid bureaucrats who served the Caliphates and particularly the Abbasid Caliphate, following the Islamic conquest of Persia. Many of these administrators seem likely to have clung to their former Zoroastrian beliefs even as they accepted Islam (Lapidus 2002: 64–65, 76). al-Hawali depicts these Zorostrastrians or Mazdaites (*al-Majus*) as architects of a malign conspiracy to undermine Islam by spreading free thinking (*zandaqa*), claiming that they deliberately infiltrated the Abbasid state so as to destroy the Quran and the Sunna. In particular, the Barmakids, a former Persian dynasty that was highly influential at the Abbasid court, contributed to the conspiracy by frittering away the resources of the treasury by hiring poets (al-Hawali n.d.). A number of other Salafi intellectuals have claimed that the pernicious influence of Zoroastrianism has persisted into the modern era, even going so far as to claim that the 'Mazdaites' were the real architects of the Iranian Revolution (Maher 2016: 103). Not only do such claims serve to further justify anti-Shia rhetoric, they tie in with the pervasive fear evoked by Islamists and Salafis that the values and belief systems of the pre-Islamic 'age of ignorance' (*jahiliyya*) have reasserted themselves and undermined the fundamental values of Muslim society.

3 Tactical Conspiracism and Its Origins in Political Culture

Daniel Pipes, whose tendency is to treat Middle Eastern conspiracy theorising as an expression of an underlying political pathology, considers and then largely rejects the notion that Middle Eastern politicians construct conspiracies for essentially rational purposes. He argues that even leaders sincerely believe that the nefarious plots of which they speak will take place, given that they themselves have grown up within a wider conspiratorial culture (Pipes 1996: 246). Nevertheless, it is here that Gray's distinction between 'political culture' and culture per se is significant. As Gray observes, since the era of colonial modernity, the political cultures of the region have helped to facilitate the proliferation of conspiracist thinking. Colonial regimes in the Islamic World ruled in an absolutist fashion, and managed local populations by co-opting and often Europeanising a small number of local elites whilst depriving the rest of the

population of the benefits of citizenship and democracy that were the supposed fruits of the imperial 'civilising mission' (Gray 2010: 52–53).

Unsurprisingly, this had significant consequences for the structure and dynamics of the post-colonial states in the region. The vast state-society gulf that had characterised the colonial state was also a feature of the post-colonial regimes, which were dominated by self-generating and self-sustaining elites (Gray 2010: 104). In the early years, populists such as Jamal Abd al-Nasir used conspiracist language to rally the Middle Eastern public in the name of Arab nationalism and the battle against Western colonialism (53). However, as the credibility of official ideologies such as Ba'athism and Arab nationalism declined, the post-independence state increasingly lost the ability to win the hearts and minds of its population, and its increasing lack of transparency led Middle Eastern publics to distrust official narratives (102). Furthermore, continued interventions by the Western powers, particularly the USA, for the purpose of securing oil resources or manipulating the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, provided inspiration for those seeking to propagate conspiracy theories (53–74). The continued co-optation of democratically unaccountable state leaders—such as Mubarak in Egypt and the Shah in Iran—further added to the apparent externality of the state, while the CIA's backing of the coup against the nationalist prime minister of Iran, Muhammad Musaddiq, in 1953 seemed to provide evidence that genuine conspiracies against the people of the region were taking place (69). It was thus easy for those seeking to confront the established socio-political order in the region to use conspiracy theories to construct a counter-hegemonic narrative; Khomeini's own depiction of America as the "Great Satan" exploited a widespread resentment of the country's interventions in Iranian politics (71).[3]

The point, therefore, is that Islamist use of conspiracist language demonstrates not a wider cultural pathology so much as a deliberate and rational effort to enter into the "ideological vacuum" (Gray 2010: 88) created by the colonial and post-colonial divergence between state and society. Before we conclude that languages of conspiracy encapsulate the fundamentally irrational character of Islamist politics, we need to consider the long history of rationalism within Islamic philosophy and the manner in which Islamic rationalism has justified a 'double discourse' strategy on the part of Muslim intellectuals. Nikki Keddie has shown us how the proto-Islamist thinker Jamal al-Din al-Afghani drew on classical philosophers such as Ibn Sina and al-Farabi in advocating rationalism to an elite audience while selling a religiously dogmatic, and indeed conspiratorial, message to the Muslim masses. This strategy was rooted

3 On the use of conspiracism to counter state hegemony, see Gray (2010: 107–109).

in the belief that a diffusion of rationalist ideals would cause dissension within the Muslim community, and that an inherently religious message could act as a unifying force (Keddie 1983: 37–39). In similar vein, the Sudanese Islamist Hasan al-Turabi frequently advocates Islamic rationalism within his voluminous writings while using religious dogma and claims of Western conspiracy to galvanise the masses.

When observing the conspiracist claims made by these individuals in their immediate political context, it is easy to identify the instrumental function that they serve. Let us take, for instance, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani's denunciation as a Western agent of the Indian reformist Sayyid Ahmad Khan in his 1884 article *The Materialists in India.* The majority of historical accounts accept that Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a descendant of Mughal notables who joined the British administration in India and established an academy at Aligarh in 1877 to teach both 'modern' and 'Islamic' subjects, was a pious Muslim who accepted that it was pointless to resist the military might of the British Raj, and that Islam could best be preserved and advanced through accommodation with the imperial system (Malik 1986: 221–224). Nevertheless, al-Afghani caricatured Khan as a collaborator who sought to conspire with the British to subvert the Islamic faith itself. Speaking of Khan's reformist doctrine, which he characterised as a form of naturalism, al-Afghani claimed that it "pleased the English rulers and they saw in it the best means to corrupt the hearts of the Muslims. They began to support him, to honor him, and to help him build a college in Aligarh, called the Mohammadan College, to be a trap in which to catch the sons of the believers" (Keddie 1983: 177). According to al-Afghani, Khan himself was more than happy to partake in this conspiracy. Although he initially sought to enter into the Christian faith, he decided converting to Christianity openly would not serve his purposes, and thus he "took another road in order to serve his English masters, by sowing division among the Muslims and scattering their unity" (Keddie 1983: 177).

It is significant that al-Afghani published his denunciation of Khan in *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa* (The Firmest Bond), an Arabic language pan-Islamic journal distributed throughout the Muslim world with the specific intention of rallying the population of the Muslim world against British imperialism. In the context of addressing a mass audience, al-Afghani sought to mobilise religion as a rallying force and to use the allegation of conspiracy against the Islamic faith as a tool to delegitimise his opponents. In identifying Khan as a secret Christian, he follows the aforementioned tendency of depicting colonialism using purely religious language. Ironically, when engaging in debate in Paris with a fellow philosopher, Ernest Renan, al-Afghani condemned "the Muslim religion" for having attempted to "stifle science and stop its progress" (Keddie 1983: 183).

His protégé, Muhammad Abduh, then deliberately prevented al-Afghani's "Response to Renan," published in a French journal, being translated and distributed within the Muslim world (Kedourie 1997: 44). Evidently al-Afghani was a rational thinker who was critical of established religious beliefs but was willing to use the charge of conspiracy against Islam to serve his more immediate purpose of bolstering the Muslim community against British imperialism. Rather than selling an outright fantasy, he exploited a very real political context—the annexation of the former Muslim territories of the Indian subcontinent to the British Empire by force of arms, and the decision of a number of Muslim leaders to accommodate the British presence—and added a conspiratorial element. By denouncing Khan's brand of Islamic reformism as a conspiracy against Islam, he establishes a dialectical relationship in which his own form of Islamic activism represents the 'true' Islam. For instance, while there is much historic debate among Muslim intellectuals over the religious merits of a restoration of the seventh-century Caliphate, al-Afghani cites Khan's own opposition to the Caliphate as evidence of his "desiring discord among the Muslims and seeking to divide them" (Keddie 1983: 178). He thus legitimises his own campaign for a pan-Islamic Caliphate by making it the antithesis to a campaign to subvert the Islamic faith itself.

Like al-Afghani, the Sudanese Islamist Hasan al-Turabi was a rationalist thinker who instrumentalised conspiracist language for political purposes. As one of the only Islamist ideologues to gain access to state power, it is worth observing how he used the notion that he was battling a "conspiracy against Islam" to justify the increasingly ruthless policies of the Sudanese Islamist regime in the 1990s. Speaking to students at Nilein University in 1994, he was described by the pro-government newspaper *al-Sudan al-Hadith* as discussing "the challenges which faced the Islamic world from Western states and their followers on the inside, pointing to the conspiracies that are being plotted against Muslims through claims of terrorism and the violation of human rights" (*al-Sudan al-Hadith:* April 17, 1994). Thus the language of conspiracy served the purpose of delegitimising both Sudanese and international human rights activists who sought to denounce the regime for torturing political detainees and arming militias that committed atrocities against the country's civilian population.

Ironically, the notion of a conspiracy against Islam (or Islamism, which of course Islamists saw as synonymous with Islam) could also be used to justify conspiratorial behaviour on the part of the Islamists themselves. Indeed, the Islamist regime in Sudan came into power in circumstances that were highly conspiratorial. Rather than seizing power officially, al-Turabi and his National Islamic Front used field marshal Umar al-Bashir, the leader of a covert Islamist cell in the military to launch a coup against the democratic regime. Once in

power, al-Bashir claimed that the coup was non-partisan and even agreed with al-Turabi that the Islamist *shaikh* would go to prison so as to deceive both national and international observers as to the real ideological character of the regime (Burr and Collins 2010: 9–10). Although the new regime established a Revolutionary Command Council and appointed a cabinet of technocrats, the government was overseen by a clandestine 'Leadership Bureau' jointly run by al-Bashir and al-Turabi and comprising both military and civilian Islamists (Muhieddin 2006: 188–189).

After al-Bashir turned against his former benefactor in 1999, al-Turabi confessed his own part in this conspiracy but argued that it was justified by Western plotting against Islam. Since this point, al-Turabi has maintained that the decision to pursue a clandestine coup was forced upon his National Islamic Front by Western plotting to exclude it from the parliamentary regime of Sadiq al-Mahdi. At the time, the NIF was a minor partner in al-Mahdi's coalition government, and was using its position in an attempt to pass through parliament a controversial sharia-based criminal code which incorporated, inter alia, controversial amputation penalties for thieves and brigands. Al-Turabi maintains that to forestall the introduction of sharia, Western governments pressured the Sudanese military, who in turn pressured Sadiq al-Mahdi to remove the National Islamic Front from his regime. He uses this as evidence for his claim that Western regimes will always prevent Islamic movements from coming into power via democratic means.[4] His narrative is, to put it mildly, convenient; a majority of the members of the Sudanese parliament had voted to postpone a decision on the NIF-backed sharia code until a constitutional conference could be held, and part of the reason that the NIF were excluded from the final coalition government was that they refused to participate in the ongoing negotiations over the constitutional situation (Jadein 2002: 309; Khalid 1990: 374–386). Nevertheless, although it is difficult to establish whether al-Turabi's claims of Western pressure were true or not, it remains pertinent that Western governments have had a long history of using local proxies in the Islamic world to marginalise political movements they deem unpalatable: al-Turabi himself cites Western support for the military regime that seized power to forestall a likely Islamist election victory in Algeria in 1991 as further evidence of his point of view.[5] Part of the rationale for the conspiracy to conceal the true nature of the coup was that if the true ideological character of the regime were to become manifest both Western governments and the secular Arab regimes to

4 Hasan al-Turabi Interview with Ahmad Mansour (Part 8), *Al-Jazeera*, June 1 (2016). At: goo.gl/3AiSn4. Accessed 5/06/2016.

5 Hasan al-Turabi Interview with Ahmad Mansour (Part 8).

which they were allied would conspire against it. Thus, Islamist conspiracism might be understood as integral to what Faisal Devji has termed a "logic of mirroring"—one which transforms Islamist strategies to become the "mirror images of Western attacks on Islam" (Devji: 2015).[6] The new regime in Sudan would become just as secretive and neo-patrimonial as the Western-backed secular regimes it condemned.

It is equally true that just as Islamists used conspiracism to delegitimise their political opponents, those same opponents have used the same strategy against them. Throughout the mid to late twentieth century, Marxist-inspired parties in the Muslim world accused their Islamist nemeses of acting in cahoots with Western capitalist governments to sabotage popular revolution. The Sudanese communists' reaction to the NIF coup discussed above is a case in point: rather than claiming that Western pressure forced the military-Islamist conspiracy to overthrow democracy, as al-Turabi would, leading figures in the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) would claim that al-Bashir's coup was all part of an American conspiracy to bring the al-Turabi into power.[7] Al-Turabi himself was well aware of the danger such tactics posed to his movement and would often use his bitingly satirical wit to counter them. For instance, when in 1965 al-Turabi and a group of other political party leaders pushed measures through parliament banning the SCP on the grounds that its ideology fostered atheism, he responded to the charge that his campaign was part of a Western capitalist conspiracy against the communists by remarking "the communists like to interpret every phenomena as a conspiracy against them, if they were sitting under a tree and a bird urinated on them they would say the Americans were behind that bird!" (Taha: 1978)

While conspiracism has been used against Islamists by their secular opponents, it has been deployed within ideological conflicts among the Islamists themselves. As Islamism itself is often an inchoate movement, deploying conspiracist language can serve to marginalise groups that are deemed either too 'radical' or too 'moderate'. Let us take, for example, the discourse of the established Islamist regimes in Iran and Sudan towards the latest manifestation of militant Islamist radicalism, Daesh. Speaking of atrocities committed by Daesh and the militant organisation Boko Haram, al-Bashir declared that "I said CIA and Mossad stand behind these organisations; there is no Muslim that would carry out such acts" (Saul 2015) The Iranian regime, which is hostile to Daesh on

6 Devji makes these observations with specific reference to al-Qaeda's targeting of Western civilians, but the same principle can be applied to understand the tactics pursued by al-Turabi and the NIF.

7 Fatima Ahmad Ibrahim, quoted in *al-Sahafa*, October 19 (2003).

account of the militant organisation's anti-Shia sectarianism, has used similar language. In 2014, the Iranian military chief of staff described Daesh as an "Israel[i] and America[n] movement for the creation of a secure border for the Zionists against the forces of resistance in the region" (Baker 2014). The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks were also characterised by one member of Turkish Islamist government as part of an Israeli conspiracy seeking to "boost enmity towards Islam" (Saul 2015). Such claims articulate a wider vision of conflict between Western/Israeli regimes and the Islamic faith, even as they seek to denounce the most radical proponents of such a narrative. They gain credibility among civilian populations within the region because of the long history of manipulation of regional politics by Western intelligence agencies. Yet, they also provide evidence of Islamists' tendencies to pursue 'double discourses'; even as the Iranian and Sudanese regimes have denounced militant extremism as a product of Western conspiracy to galvanise their respective publics against these organisations, they have shown themselves willing to co-operate with Western governments in the battle against them.[8]

The accusation of conspiring with America has also been used to delegitimise Islamists deemed to be too open to Western influence. Throughout the twentieth century there was much debate between two specific ideological trends within the broader Islamic revival, specifically the 'Islamist' trend that incorporated Western and particularly Marxist ideology and prioritised revolutionary action in the political arena, and a 'Salafi' trend that perceived doctrine, public morals, and the campaign against Western cultural influence to be more central to the renewal of religion than narrowly focused political action.[9] Let us observe how the charge of conspiring with the West has been mobilised in the context of a specific ideological conflict between the Salafis of Sudan and the Islamist *par excellence*, Hasan al-Turabi. From the 1960s, Hasan al-Turabi, representing the 'political' school within the Sudanese Islamic Movement, warded off a number of challenges to his leadership of that movement from Salafi-oriented individuals who wanted greater resources to be devoted to its 'educationalist' programme. In 1985, the Salafi scholar Ahmad Bin Malik published a book entitled *Al-Sarim Maslul fi'l Radd ala al-Turabi Shatim al-Rasul* (The sword is unsheathed in response to al-Turabi the blasphemer

8 Iranian officials have supported limited de facto co-operation in the battle against ISIS in Iraq and have discussed potential further co-operation with Western diplomats, although fears of a backlash by hardliners have impeded their efforts (see Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2015: 10–12). Meanwhile, the Sudanese regime has co-operated extensively with Western intelligence agencies in the battle against al-Qaeda (see Cockett 2010: 164).

9 For a useful summary of the ideological fault lines between these two strands, see Denouex (2011).

against the Prophet). Apart from denouncing al-Turabi's liberal positions on Islamic doctrine, Malik claimed that his decision to send a number of members of his own movement to America showed that he was collaborating with a Western plot against Islam, and that he and the emergent security apparatus of the Islamic Movement sought to control Muslims for the same motives as the CIA.[10] Malik's characterisation of al-Turabi's motives was somewhat disingenuous; al-Turabi's rationale for dispatching his intellectual disciples to study in Western countries was that in the conditions brought about by the emergence of the modern world order, Muslims had to borrow the tools of Western society in order to compete with it. Yet, by tapping into ever present fears of CIA manipulation, Malik was able to adopt a reductionist approach to a complex intellectual and strategic debate, encouraging his followers to view it through the prism of a binary conflict between Islam and the West.

In the aftermath in of al-Turabi's split with Umar al-Bashir in 1999, both his and the president's partisans accused each other of having brought about a new American colonialism in Sudan (*Al-Bawaba* 2004; al-Mahdi 2002). In 2004, al-Bashir called the Sudanese people to rise up against al-Turabi's newly established Popular Congress Party on the grounds that its members were 'Zionist and Masonic agents' (Anon. 2004). In accusing al-Turabi and his cohorts of Freemasonry, al-Bashir was instrumentalising an already established historical narrative. It is widely accepted, for instance, that the early Islamic activists Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani were members of a Masonic Lodge in Egypt known as *Kawkab al-Sharq* (Eastern Star). Through this lodge, al-Afghani and Abduh had informal access to members of Egypt's elite (Sedgwick 2014: 20), and their critics have thus been quick to use their Masonic affiliations as evidence of the fundamentally conspiratorial character of their activism (Kedourie 1997: 20–22). Since al-Turabi himself can easily be identified with such figures, the accusation gains credibility. Again, it is worth reiterating that this conspiracist language was intended for mass consumption, which sets it apart from the more 'cultic' narratives pursued by a number of conspiracists in the Western world.[11]

Islamist conspiracism also serves to justify particular conceptualisations of the Umma (Islamic Community), sharia, and the groups best poised to defend it. By characterising their idealised imagining of Islamic society as an authentic and existing model that was undermined by modern colonial and older forms of conspiracy, Islamists could make their belief that a homogeneous and unified

10 For a discussion of Malik's text, see Sidahmed (2014).

11 For an example of the cultic character of conspiracism in the Western world, see for example, Barkun (1997: 249). See also the chapter by Dr Paul Jackson in this volume.

Umma could re-emerge seem credible. Again, what makes these conspiratorial narratives so convincing is that they can be related to a very real history of colonial subjection. For instance, al-Hawali (n.d.) writes that the European colonisers of the Islamic World "revived local dialects and local cultures, dug up ancient idols and put them on display, and dug up old civilisations and said 'this is your civilisation', and they made each stretch of the Islamic world an independent civilisation." Evidently there is much truth to these arguments: the Europeans did promote Pharaonicism as the basis of Egyptian identity and succeeded in influencing the early nationalist movements in this regard (Reid 2003), whereas British provincial administrators in Sudan encouraged local dialects and languages as a means of preventing the extension of Arabic into 'African' regions (Abdelhay *et al.* 2016) and promoted the use of customary laws as a substitute for sharia (Ibrahim 2008). The French similarly fostered Phoenician identity in mandatory Lebanon and attempted to demarcate Arab and Berber culture in North Africa (Hoisington 1978; Kaufmann 2014). Nevertheless, by attributing cultural diversity in the Islamic world purely to colonial rule—itself an insidious manifestation of a Jewish, Crusader, Zoroastrian, and Shia conspiracy—al-Hawali is able to neglect the very real historical factors that lead to the diversification of the Islamic community and bolster his own culturally purist vision. Again, it is worth reiterating the manner in which the long history of colonial intervention in the Islamic world has created an environment in which such a particular form of conspiracist language can flourish. As Frantz Fanon observed, it was the efforts of colonial ideologues to disconnect Arab Muslim populations from their history and impose Western worldviews that strengthened the psychological need for a return to an authentic past (Fanon 1967: 170–171). It is this need that al-Hawali's campaign to defend a monolithic Islam against an all-encompassing conspiracy addresses.

Al-Hawali (n.d.) legitimises his and the Sahwa movement's campaign for the resurgence of a monolithic Islamic doctrine by blaming growing doctrinal diversity within Islam upon a conspiracy of Western Orientalists, criticising them for printing books about "distorted doctrines." Because of the Orientalists' plots to thwart the Islamic resurgence, Muslims are confused over which Islam it is they must return to, since they find in their libraries separate books on the Sunna, the Rafidis (Shia), the Kharijites, and the Mu'tazilites (Al-Hawali n.d.).[12] Meanwhile, the purveyors of the one true version of Islam,

12 The Kharijites were a seventh and eighth century ultra-literalist group who broke away from both the Sunnis and the Shia; the Mu'tazilites were a medieval group condemned by contemporary Salafis on account of their claim that the Quran could be interpreted rationally.

that of the Quran and the Sunna, were labelled by the Orientalists as one sect among others, being disparagingly labelled the 'Wahhabis'.[13] Al-Hawali is, of course, a follower of the doctrine of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab or a 'Wahhabi' himself, although he would claim that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab merely revived 'true Islam', and did not merely create a particular school of interpretation.

Al-Hawali's articulations of sharia are also framed as a part of his wider campaign to rescue to Islam from the malicious plots of the colonizers and their diverse allies. The colonizers, he tells us, deliberately replaced sharia law with 'positive' (*wada'i*) legislation on the European model, and sought to restrict the role played by sharia in the governance of the economy (Al-Hawali n.d.). Although these claims have a great deal of truth, by attributing the decline of sharia merely to colonial conspiracy and failing to acknowledge that it had always existed in parallel with more mundane forms of legislation since the days of classical Islam, al-Hawali is able to envision an all-encompassing and unified form of sharia that the colonizers have 'done away' with. In the last fifty years, Islamists and politicians inclined towards Islamism have tended to champion sharia not just as a divine requirement but as a defensive tool against the subversion of Muslim morals. Again, conspiracism serves to justify such rhetoric. For instance, the Secretary General of the Islamic Universities Association declared that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had incited Jews to "spread corruption among all human societies so they can rule. All the pornographic films in the world are made by Jewish companies, and the same goes for drugs" (Partridge and Geaves 2007: 90). Thus, in the name of defending Islam against this pervasive attempt to subvert it, Islamists begin to justify far more extensive forms of social control than ever existed in historic sharia. Al-Hawali, for instance, whose Sahwa movement held highly conservative attitudes to the role of women in society, implicitly justified the ban on female drivers in Saudi Arabia by arguing that the call to take women out of their domestic environments was part of a conspiratorial design to destroy Islam by tearing up the social fabric that underpinned it (Al-Hawala n.d.).

4 Conclusion

At first glance, it might appear easy to conclude that Islamist conspiracism is the product of an irrational and purely pathological worldview. In presenting the

13 The term Wahhabi, although now commonly used by scholars and the media, is disliked by the Wahhabis themselves who reject the implication that they are merely the followers of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and prefer the term *muwahhidun*, that is those who practise the doctrine of divine unity (see Algar 2002: 1).

conspiracy against Islam as part of a Manichaean and all-encompassing struggle against the Islamic faith, the purveyors of Islamist conspiracism frequently oversimplify complex historical phenomena and undermine the diverse character of Islamic society. In that Islamist conspiracist discourses characterise post-Enlightenment forms of colonialism and neo-colonialism as manifestations of a plot against their faith that dates back to the seventh century, one might argue that they are essentially anti-modern in character. For thinkers such as al-Hawali, the conflict is as much a metaphysical one as it is a battle against specific conspiratorial organisations or governments. Yet, in spite of the atavistic character of the discourse itself, contemporary Islamist conspiracism owes a great deal to the impact of Western colonialism on the Muslim world. Furthermore, such conspiracist language has often been propounded by intellectuals who have a strong grounding in Islamic rationalism, such as Hasan al-Turabi and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Such thinkers exploited the exaggerated colonial and post-colonial division between state and society to propagate conspiracy theories that might have been less credible in a different era, for the purpose of legitimising their own visions of society and of discrediting their intellectual and political opponents. The manner in which Islamists have used conspiracism to target other Islamists whose ideology or politics they perceive to differ substantially from their own further highlights the essentially tactical character of this discourse. While it would probably be an exaggeration to claim that all those Islamist intellectuals who utilise conspiracist language were rationalists,[14] what unites the majority of Islamist conspiracists is that their discourse is shaped by a context of historic and contemporary Western interventionism and speaks to a need for psychological independence from cultural colonisation.

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14 Qutb, for instance, was an explicit critic of the Islamic rationalists; see Calvert 2010: 16, 208. See also p. 41 for a discussion of the impact his childhood belief in otherworldly forces in his later politics.

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CHAPTER 14

Anti-Jewish and Anti-Zionist Conspiracism in the Arab World: Historical and Political Roots

Barbara De Poli

1 Introduction

It is generally considered that conspiracism emerged in the late eighteenth century in Europe, with origins that can be traced to Medieval anti-Semitism (Cohn 1967; Poliakov 1955).[1] In the Middle East, however, the phenomenon is rather more recent. Middle Eastern conspiracism originated in the late nineteenth century when, as I shall explain below, a certain European narrative began to spread more widely. Its spread accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century, but it has seen an extraordinary proliferation since the beginning of the era of the Internet. Conspiracy theories that spread in the Middle East, although they have a considerable relevance in the region, are therefore not a unique case, but constitute a segment of a worldwide phenomenon, while developing their own specific character.

Although not many scholars have focused upon conspiracism in the Arab world, its main features and motivations have been investigated in their social, political, and cultural dimensions, underlining the subject's complexity (Pipes 1996; Gray 2010). A frequent—and banal—observation is that, according to Arab conspiracy theories, the causes of all evil afflicting contemporary Islamic societies are attributed to external factors (especially the USA and Israel), which operate subtly and secretly for their destruction. But the phenomenon suggests outcomes that appear anything but banal when contextualised in the contemporary political situation.

In this chapter, I will take a look at one specific aspect of this framework, that of anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist conspiracism, by going through some important narratives in the Arab political context that produced and continue

1 By conspiracism and conspiracy myths/theories, we mean interpretation of facts that differ from the official truths; an interpretation supposing conspiratorial causes. As Matthew Gray observes: "It is difficult to draw a clear and concise line between an idea that is conspiracist versus one that, for example, is derived from political paranoia or denial—or even one that, wittingly or not, has successfully identified an actual case of conspiracy" (Gray 2010: 4).

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to produce them, in order to analyse its origins, motivations and results. The phenomenon is not only characteristic of Middle Eastern conspiracy theories, but also of regional political dynamics, where Israel is a leading actor; it also bears witness to the changing way Muslims perceive the Jewish community as its social and political status has changed in the region. It is clear, I suggest, that anti-Zionist conspiracism and anti-Judaism tend to sustain each other *tout court* in this context.

2 Jews in the Arab World

Having developed its main traits on the wake of conspiracism, anti-Semitism in the Arab world is also a relatively recent phenomenon that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Previously, Muslim perception of the Jews was very different, since they have always been part of the *dār al-islām.*[2] Jewish tribes were involved in the founding deed of the community guided by the prophet, the Medina Constitution (622 C.E.), which sanctioned a covenant of solidarity among the various groups of the city, being thereby a full part of the process of growth of the Muslim *ummah*. But despite the charter of 622, relations between the Jews and the rising Muslim community were not always peaceful. The tenacious resistance by the Jews against conversion to the new faith and their failure to support the Prophet against Mecca led to the expulsion of two tribes, while the Banū Qurayza, who betrayed the charter of Medina by negotiating with the Meccans, were massacred: men were put to the sword, while women and children were enslaved. As a consequence, Jews are mentioned in a significant number of verses of the Qur'an (over fifty times), but the text imagery is ambivalent, reflecting the controversial relations between the Prophet and the Jewish tribes (Cohen 2013b; Scheitzer and Perry 2002; Lewis 1987): Jews certainly enjoy consideration as monotheists (Qur'an, II:62, V:69, X:93–94, XX:17), but in the majority of cases, they are considered falsifiers—together with the Christians—of divine truth, those who disobeyed the prophets sent by God (Qur'an, VII:163–171, IX:30, XVII:4–8).

However, after the Prophet's death, it was precisely on the basis of Muhammad's revelation and the Medina charter that those Jews, like the Christians, who did not convert to the message of the *Seal of Prophets* were still held to be "People of the Book," the first recipients of the Biblical tradition to which

2 Literally "house of Islam" and peace, opposed to *dār al harb* "the house of war" where jihad against infidels could be fought.

the Qur'an itself belonged. This is why, in Islamic societies and before modern times when the principle of citizenship was introduced, they enjoyed the status of *dhimmīs* (literally, "protected ones"), and were able to continue practising their faith, even though in a subordinate condition, as long as they acknowledged Islamic political authority and agreed to pay a poll tax. Of course, treatment of *dhimmī* varied from region to region and epoch to epoch; as Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora write, they experienced "fourteen centuries of passions and oppressions, of sometimes tragic, sometimes auspicious relations" (2013: 17), but there is no doubt that all told, religious minorities could live in more favourable conditions in Muslim territories than in the Christian West. Like other minorities, the Jews often held high-ranking positions in the administrations of Islamic governments (Lewis 2014; Stillman 1979; Friedman 2003), they did not suffer the systematic persecution they underwent in Europe (Cohen 1994, 2013a) and, above all, they certainly were never seen as conspirators working at a dark plot to take over the world. Attacks against the Jewish communities increased considerably from the nineteenth century, after the rise of unprecedented nationalist tensions (Frankel 1997; Cohen 2004; Bodansky 1999; Morris 2001). In this context, demonisation of the Jews and their transformation into fearsome plotters is due partly to the metabolism of conspiratorial narratives of European origin and partly to the foundation of the State of Israel.

3 The Judeo-Masonic Conspiracy

The myth of a Jewish conspiracy has European roots that have largely been identified (Cohn 1967; Taguieff 1992, 2004), drawing on the anti-Jewish tradition in Christian Europe since the twelfth century, when belief in a secret Jewish government plotting against Christianity was widespread (Poliakov 1955). However, the forerunner of the modern form of the Jewish-Masonic world conspiracy myth may be considered the five-volume work by the French Jesuit abbé Augustin Barruel, *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, published in 1797. According to Barruel, a "Jewish sect" (direct heir of the Templars) was responsible for the French revolution and was preparing the way for the Antichrist; furthermore, leading a centuries-old conspiracy, the sect had founded the orders of the Freemasons and the Illuminati, had even infiltrated the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and intended to dominate the world in less than a century (Anon. 1878).

The conspiracy theme initiated by Barruel was taken up in the second half of the nineteenth century in other European countries with different

narratives (Cohn 1967)[3] that eventually formed the cultural substrate on which was drawn the most famous forgery of anti-Jewish conspiracy thinking: the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (Cohn 1967; Taguieff 1992, 2004; Ben-Itto 2005). Presented as the outcome of the First Zionist Congress held in Basel in 1897, the *Protocols* aimed at certifying the existence of a worldwide conspiracy led by the "representative of Zion, of the 33rd Degree," as stated in the signature at the bottom of the document. As is well known, the *Protocols*, probably a product of the Russian-French espionage and counter-espionage, also became a propaganda tool for Nazi ideology, the anti-Semitism of which led to the most dramatic genocide in European history. As a result of this event, in Europe conspiracy theories—with few and stigmatised reappearances (Garaudy 1995)—were buried under the horrors of the Shoah.

In the Middle East, the conspiracy myth against Jews inherited the European narratives, following nevertheless an original path along two distinct (but converging) channels of diffusion: the first, a Christian one, Jesuit and Maronite—and therefore in line with Barruel's anti-Masonic and anti-Semitic thinking—dates back at least to the second half of the nineteenth century; the second emerged because of Nazi propaganda, but was already operating in the Middle East in the 1920s, and focuses more specifically on the *Protocols.*

In the late nineteenth century, especially in Lebanon, the anti-Jewish campaign, nourished by Jesuits and Maronites thanks to the Arabic translations of works such as *Der Talmudjude*, was accompanied by the anti-Masonic propaganda promoted by the Lebanese Jesuit Luis Shaykhū (Zaydān 1982: 142; Corrado 2007) the author of, among other works, *The Masonic Secret in the Sect of Freemasons* (Shaykhū 1909). However, it is significant that at the time, such anti-Masonic and anti-Jewish views did not enjoy much popularity outside the Lebanese Catholic milieu. In fact, in the Arab-Islamic world, anti-Jewish and anti-Masonic propaganda did not take root until the late 1920s, when Zionism took on the proportions of a region-wide conflict. Anti-Jewish and anti-Masonic articles then began to be published in increasing numbers (De Poli 2014: 260), but there is no doubt that the most influential product of this specific trend was the work of the Maronite and self-avowed former Freemason ʿAwād al-Khūrī, *Asl al-Māsūniyya* ("The Origin of Freemasonry"), published in Beirut

3 For instance: in Germany, *Der Talmudjude* ("The Talmudic Jew"), written by August Rohling (1871), and the famous *Rabbi's Speech*, originally a story by John Retcliff (1868) which spread around almost all of Europe; in France *Le juif, le judaisme et la judaisasion des peuples chrétiens* (1869) written by the far-right Catholic Gougenot des Mousseaux, or the 600-page *Les francs-maçons et les juifs* (1881) by Abbé Chabauty; in *Russia, Jewish, Local and Universal Brotherhoods*, written in 1888 by Jacob Brafmann, or *Conquest of the World by the Jews* (1870), written by the (supposed) Serbian Osman-Bey.

in 1929,[4] which in Arab countries became the prime source for much of later anti-Masonic literature (De Poli 2014: 262–269). According to the information provided by al-Khūrī himself, he was a businessman who sought his fortune in Brazil, where he met the president of the time, Prudente de Moraise Barros, and where, in unclear circumstances, he met "the owner of this History" (al-Khūrī 1929: 6).

In his text, al-Khūrī raised the history of a plot promoted by the Jews since biblical times, through a cult called the Mysterious Force, and of the creation of Freemasonry as a smokescreen for the cult's activities. Summarising al-Khūrī's narrative, which abounds in precise and bizarre details: in Jerusalem in the year 37 C.E., nine Jews (including Herod II and Hiram Abiud) founded the organisation Mysterious Force to destroy Christianity and wipe out the Christians, and after seven years of preparatory work they founded the first Masonic temple, called *Jerusalem*, officially setting up their activity, which was of course equally directed against Islam when it arose.[5] Each of the nine founders, before dying, handed down his secret to a close descendant, thus ensuring that the mission would continue through the ages. Herod's ideal survived in secret through the centuries until Joseph Levi (1665–1717) in London decided to renew the Mysterious Force with the help of two Englishmen, Desaguliers and George,[6] establishing modern Freemasonry on June 24, 1717 (al-Khurī 1929: 67).

This 'Arab' line of conspiracy, with its epicentre in Maronite Lebanon, later merged with the other line of the conspiracy myth. In Cairo, the presence of cells of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, already active from 1926–1927 on the initiative of Rudolf Hess' brother Alfred, probably instigated the publication of the first Egyptian edition of the *Protocols* (Taguieff 2004: 213–253; 2010: 142–178; Harkabi 1992), until then mainly translated into Arabic by Arab Catholics (Lewis 1987: 235–236; Tsimhoni 1978: 79). At the time, anti-Semitic propaganda had little impact on Egyptian Muslims, outside of radical circles. However, contrary to what happened in Europe, the end of the World War Two by no means led to the extinction of anti-Jewish conspiracism. After the creation of the State of Israel, Egyptians became aware of the outcome of the new geopolitical framework, and Nazi-founded conspiracy production

4 I refer here to the English version of the text, *Dissipation of the Darkness*. At: http://ethosworld.com/library/G-S-Lawrence-Dissipation-of-the-Darkness-History-of-the-Origin-of-Freemasonry.pdf.

5 As Gray observes: "Conspiracy theories are very often heavy on factual detail … because they rely on the appearance of scientific objectivity and methodology to lend both credibility and authority—and even coercion—to the theory" (Gray 2010: 39).

6 Rev. Dr Desaguliers, who was actually of French origin, played an important role in the foundation of speculative Freemasonry; we are not told who George was.

once again became influential. In the 1950s, two books were published where Freemasonry was associated with a Jewish conspiracy: *Zionism and Freemasonry* and *The Masonic Society: Its Truths and Mysteries* (Ismat 1950; Ghalūsh n.d). Especially, the plots of the *Protocols* became the centrepiece of every conspiracy argument. The 1927 edition of the *Protocols* seems to have been the only one published before 1951, when the first Arabic translation by a Muslim appeared in Cairo. From the 1950s on, new editions came out with increasing regularity and in close succession, and have not ceased with the new millennium. There are at least nine different complete translations into Arabic (from French, English, and German), besides many books of commentaries, often sponsored by Arab governments, such as the United Arab Republic, Egypt, Iraq, or the PLO (Harkabi 1972: 229–241; 1992).

In its Arab variant, this genre focusing on the myth of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy reached its peak in the 1980s and 1990s with the publication of at least twenty works, mostly in Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo (for instance ʿĀbid 1988; Taʿīma 1986; ʿAbd Allāh 1989; Dayāb 1989; al-Jazāʾirī 1990; al-Sahmarānī 1988; al-Kafrī 2002; Hammū 2003), all based on al-Khūrī's *The Origin of Freemasonry* and *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.

As a matter of fact, from the 1950s onwards, the international Judeo-Masonic conspiracy myth became inseparable from the *Protocols* and from Zionism, used to explain any revolt or assassination that had taken place after the alleged origin of the secret sect, as for example when Russia fell into the hands of Communism in 1917. This way, it easily became possible to attribute all the evils of the world to the Elders of Zion, since their program of domination included every aspect of society.

Still today, the *Protocols* especially are not only regarded as the strongest 'evidence' of the Jewish plot to dominate the world, but the forgery is also consulted to explain the basic reasons for the crisis that contemporary society is going through (Dayāb 1989: 61–72; Al-Kafrī 2002: 86–103; ʿĀbid 1988: 211–237; Taʿīma 1986: 232–273); a crisis brought about by the constant political threat posed by Israel, but also by the corruption, demolition of values, and religious vacuum that the Jews have supposedly deliberately and systematically imposed on the current societies of the world.

4 Other Conspiracy Myths

I have given ample room to the myth of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy, not only because it is the most structured conspiracy theory, but also because it may be seen as the mother of all anti-Jewish conspiracy theories, with a

wide reception in the Middle East throughout the twentieth century up to the present day.

In the context of general contemporary conspiracist thinking, the range of anti-Islamic activities attributed to the Jews is extremely wide and varied. A quick look at the Web shows a scenario where Zionists are accused of the most disparate catastrophes and disasters: the 2004 tsunami, shark attacks in the Sinai, exportation to Arab countries of fruit and vegetables or other products contaminated by AIDS and other diseases (such as cancer or hepatitis) or which could produce infertility; the Pepsi logo is supposed to be a Zionist acronym, and the cartoon *Tom and Jerry*, *The Simpsons*, and Pokemon are also Zionist conspiracies (Wenig 2015; Slackman 2001).[7]

These accusations have largely anecdotal importance, though they certainly do reveal a clear tendency to blame the Jews/Zionists for the strangest things. Direct political accusations are definitely more significant, since they fit into a strongly structured context where information and counter-information play a central role. The Jews—more often the Zionists—in particular are held to be secretly responsible for many terrorist outrages (from Boston to Cairo and Nigeria, but above all the 9/11 attacks[8]), often associated with the United States (Pipes 1996: 141–169), becoming the first and last cause of the many ills affecting the Islamic world.

These are conspiracist currents that do not arise and spread exclusively within popular culture, but are also echoed and conveyed by political authorities and the media. Not only that, Middle Eastern governments have amply contributed to the spread of the *Protocols*, and in recent decades there have been countless conspiracist statements by Arab heads of state (Pipes 1996), disseminated by the media and picked up on the Internet, together with the weirdest hypotheses (Gray 2010: 144–153). One reason for this is obvious: "Conspiracy theories provide a diversion; an explanation that distracts society and individuals from placing blame at the feet of the government and political leadership, and instead encourages blame-shifting to external factors" (Gray 2010: 118). But, of course, this does not explain the whole phenomenon.

In the context of the scientific study of Arab-Islamic conspiracism, culturalist epistemologies, like the one provided by Daniel Pipes, offer little help for

7 See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspiracy_theories_in_the_Arab_world. Accessed 12/11/2016; https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Muslim_Conspiracy_Theories. Accessed 12/11/2016.

8 On September 17, 2001, the Lebanese satellite channel al-Manār (close to Hezbollah) was the first station to allege that 4000 Jews didn't go to work the morning of the attacks, presumably because they were alerted in advance, but the idea soon spread that the Mossad itself was behind the attacks. This channel is often a vehicle of conspiracist theses which give credit to the *Protocols* (Gray 2010: 1–2, 146–147).

understanding, since they merely ridicule it and reduce it to a mental product of the "alienated" (Pipes 1996: 2).[9] Very different results can be obtained by putting it into its historical and political context, thus discovering the genesis of Middle Eastern conspiracist currents, the paths they have taken, the motivations that induce or produce conspiracist hypotheses, and their goals, if any. I agree with Gray (2010: 1–8) when he observes that conspiracism occurs in the Arab world as a result of historical impacts, due to social and political dynamics: conspiracy theories do not operate in a vacuum.

If we look back over the history of the Middle East from World War One, one notices above all the opacity and unscrupulousness of Western interventions in the region, marked by ambiguity and ambivalence. For example, speaking of World War One, it is well known that while the British were making promises to Sharif Husayn, governor of Hijāz, to recognise Arab independence after the war "in the limits and boundaries proposed by the Sherif of Mecca" (Halifax 1939: 2), in exchange for Arab support in the conflict against the Ottoman empire (as emerged in the Husayn-MacMahon correspondence July 1915 to March 1916), at the very same time, the British were also making a secret agreement with France to split up the region at the end of the conflict (the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916). Shortly afterwards, they guaranteed the Jews substantial support for establishing a Jewish home in Palestine (the Balfour Declaration of 1917).

In such a case, the historical responsibility from the point of view of those on the receiving end, for what can well be reasonably—though improperly—seen as a European and Zionist plot falls entirely on the West, and it is equally clear that similar policies can easily have given rise to a climate of constant suspicion and hence to the development of a conspiracist dimension.

Gray, for example, devotes a whole chapter to the establishment of the State of Israel and the ensuing conflicts, which amply nourished Middle Eastern conspiracism. He casts light on the many ambiguities of Israeli policy, often through manoeuvres carried out to the detriment of the unaware Palestinians and of the Arab world in general, and which can easily be viewed as plots (Gray 2010: 53–67). One need only remember the 1956 Sèvres Protocol, which the renowned Israeli historian Avi Shlaim called the "War Plot" (Shlaim 1997),

9 Especially, Pipes refers to the "conspirational mentality" and believes that Middle Eastern conspiracism is "one of the region's most distinctive political features" (1996: 1–2). Gray has this to say about Pipes' approach: "Orientalist explanations such as these are not only pathological in orientation and thus analytically questionable, but also intellectually biased: in effect if not in intent, they usually incline towards a Western view of (or agenda for) the region rather than being about how the region actually is, in and itself … in some cases are discourses of domination" (2010: 11).

and the deeds of the Mossad; for example, the Lavon Affair,[10] attempts to murder Arab leaders, and even the circulation of false money in Jordan or in Iraq in order to undermine currency, that was deemed conspiracist rubbish, but turned out to be true as even Pipes admits (1996: 20). Especially, if we consider the documented 'plots' set up by the Israeli secret service (Raviv and Melman 1990; Thomas 2015; Hoy and Ostrovsky 1990), one can hardly be surprised by the proliferation of conspiracy theories focusing on the agency, from the 9/11 attacks, the murder by poisoning of Arafat, involvement in the accident that led to the death of Diana Princess of Wales, and ending up with the attribution to the Mossad of shark attacks in Sinai, no less.

A clear example of conspiracism deriving from a grounded preoccupation, ridiculed by observers, is the threat of a Greater Israel, aired by several Arab leaders over the decades. Pipes devotes a whole chapter to this matter, debunking the expansionist hypothesis by minimising statements by Israeli leaders and amplifying the least plausible statements by Palestinian leaders in order to ridicule their assertions. For example, he dismisses the Whole Land of Israel movement as a "fringe phenomenon," declarations by Israeli political leaders supporting expansionist policies as "somewhat dubious" or "invented" (Pipes 1996: 55), and shifts the discussion to a Biblical plane. He also forgets to mention the 1982 Yinon Plan (Yinon 1982; Shahak 1982), which not only looked forward to the expansion of Israel—in the first place through re-annexation of the Sinai—but to redesigning the whole Middle East, breaking it up into micro-states on the basis of ethnic and religious fault lines, which were to be fomented for this purpose:

> The Moslem Arab World is built like a temporary house of cards put together by foreigners (France and Britain in the Nineteen Twenties), without the wishes and desires of the inhabitants having been taken into account … The dissolution of Syria and Iraq later on into ethnically or religiously unique areas such as in Lebanon, is Israel's primary target.
>
> SHAHAK 1982: PARAS 6, 22

While such 'plans' do not define Israeli policy *tout court*, they certainly do identify some orientations and tensions that cannot be dismissed as simply 'conspiracism'.

10 A group of Egyptian Jews were recruited by the Mossad to plant bombs in various strategic areas of Cairo, with the aim of creating a climate of violence and instability in order to induce the British government to retain its occupying troops in Egypt's Suez Canal zone (Code name Operation Susannah).

5 Islamists, Jihadists, and Jews

The conspiracist narrative by radical Islamists focusing on the Jews and Israel deserves special attention. In this case, the thread of the plot also involves a religious point of view, referring to the most vehement passages of the Qur'an against the Jews, in order to define their relations to the Muslims (Nettler 1987; Curtis 1986), giving rise to an "invented history," according to Bassam Tibi (2010: 13). The scholar defines the phenomenon as "Islamization of European Antisemitism" (6), that is an incorporation of European anti-Semitism into Sunni and Shiite Islam:

> In Islamist ideology, the Jews are viewed as those who manipulate others—including the US—in a conspiracy to rule the world. According to this Islamist argument, the Jews are "evil" and contaminate the world to the extent that they deserve to be annihilated.
>
> TIBI 2010: 7

Ignoring the fact that Jews in the Muslim world had the subordinate status of *dhimmi*, Islamists and jihadists associate the threat posed today by Israel to the opposition between the Jews and the Prophet in Medina, putting this circumstance into direct connection with the *Protocols*: the Jewish plot against Muhammad is supposed to have been only the first episode of the Jewish and Masonic conspiracy, which through the centuries, still aims at destroying Islam (Zeidan 2001).

The Islamist ideologue who best expressed this approach was Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), one of the main leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. In his writings, Qutb often repeated the verses of the Qur'an most hostile to Jews and Christians, grafting them onto contemporary conspiracy theories. For example, in *Our Struggle against the Jews*, first published in 1951, he wrote:

> The Jews have confronted Islam with Enmity from the moment that the Islamic state was established in Medina. They plotted against the Muslim community from the first day it became a community … The Jews were those who undertook the war of rumours, hidden conspiracy and treachery within the Muslim ranks; just as they instigated the dissemination of doubts, suspicious about Islam and falsification of the Muslim creed and leadership.
>
> QUTB 1987: 81, 84

In *Milestones*, first published in 1964, echoes of Nazi propaganda and of the *Protocols* are evident:

> Beyond this limited meaning, this statement about culture is one of the tricks played by world Jewry, whose purpose is to eliminate all limitations, especially the limitations imposed by faith and religion, so that the Jews may penetrate into body politic [*sic*] of the whole world and then may be free to perpetuate their evil designs. At the top of the list of these activities is usury, the aim of which is that all the wealth of mankind ends up in the hands of Jewish financial institutions which run on interest.
>
> QUTB 2006: 123

Qutb never explicitly mentions the *Protocols*, but in the Saudi edition of *Our Struggle against the* Jews, edited in 1970 by Zayn al-Dīn al Rakkābī, several notes provide precise references and long quotes from the *Protocols*, confirming the thesis of the ideologist (Qutb 1987: 71–88).

Similar themes have been picked up by many Salafi authors, from the renowned conservative imam Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, to members of the Saudi academic establishment (Tibi 2010: 15). The theme was also notoriously incorporated into the Charter of Hamas (a party which was an emanation of the Muslim Brotherhood) in 1988,[11] especially under Articles 17, 22, 28, 32:

> This wealth [permitted them to] take over control of the world media such as news agencies, the press, publication houses, broadcasting and the like. [They also used this] wealth to stir revolutions in various parts of the globe in order to fulfill their interests and pick the fruits. They stood behind the French and the Communist Revolutions and behind most of the revolutions we hear about here and there. They also used the money to establish clandestine organizations which are spreading around the world, in order to destroy societies and carry out Zionist interests. Such organizations are: the Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, B'nai B'rith and the like. All of them are destructive spying organizations. They also used the money to take over control of the Imperialist states and made them colonize many countries in order to exploit the wealth of those countries and spread their corruption therein. (art.22)

The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion are mentioned under Article 32:

> For Zionist scheming has no end, and after Palestine they will covet expansion from the Nile to the Euphrates. Only when they have completed digesting the area on which they will have laid their hand, they will look forward to more expansion, etc. Their scheme has been laid out in the

11 At http://www.actmemphis.org/Hamas_Charter.pdf. Accessed 12/11/2016.

> *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and their present [conduct] is the best proof of what is said there. (art.32)

Sayyid Qutb is known above all for having brought back the notion of Jihad, which he no longer interpreted as an 'effort' against enemies of the faith,[12] but as armed action, in the first place against those Muslims who failed to adopt his extreme view of Islam (De Poli 2015; Kepel 2004; Calvert 2010). While the Muslim Brotherhood chose a political path to power, Qutb's theses opened the way to the jihadist movements and terrorist groups that for years have been tearing apart the Muslim world. Qutb is still one of the main ideological references of al-Qaeda and of ISIS, which represent the globalised version of jihadism.

6 Plots and Counter-Plots

While conspiracist themes abound in the jihadist propaganda (Gray 2010: 154–156), attacks against the Jews by al-Qaeda's leader Bin Laden and his conspiracist tones actually fit more into the strategic Middle Eastern picture of his times with reference to objective reality (like the USA presence in the Arabian Peninsula or the Israeli occupation of Palestine). The *Protocols* do not seem to be a cultural reference of his. Bin Laden, always incorporating the Qur'anic narrative, rather insists on the Jewish-Crusade alliance, which—while being a dichotomic simplification of the world, a reduction of conflicts to a religious dimension, and a historical mystification—has a formidable propaganda force and is also easy to understand, since it translates a real and undeniable general convergence between the interests of the USA and Israel in the region. His tones are the following:

> We find that Jews have the first word in the American government, which is how they use America to carry out their plans in the world, and especially the Muslim world … The Jews are a people who Allah cited in the Koran as those who attacked prophets with lies and killings … They are a people who killed Allah's prophets. Would they not kill, rape and steal from humans?
>
> FBIS 2004: 110

12 'Effort' is the literal meaning of jihad which, after the conclusion of the initial phase of conquest during the first centuries is substantially understood by Muslim communities to mean, first, spiritual effort (the Greater Jihad) and only second, armed fighting (the Lesser Jihad), of a prevalently defensive nature (Khadduri 1960; Cook 2015).

Or:

> The creation of Greater Israel will entail Jewish domination over the countries of the region. What will explain to you who the Jews are? The Jews are those who slandered the Creator, so how do you think they deal with God's creation? They killed the Prophets and broke their promises … these are some of the characteristics of the Jews, so beware of them.
>
> LAWRENCE 2005: 189–190

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that, notoriously, al-Qaeda itself was the product of a 'plot' hatched against the Soviet Union by the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan who, during the Afghan conflict, funded and armed Tālibān and *mujāhidīn*, strategically feeding religious fanaticism. The so-called Operation Cyclone was the most expensive in the history of the CIA, costing billions (Cooley 1999; Rashid 2010; Brzezinski 1998; Clinton 2014).

Even more paradoxical is the fact that, in the great magma of online conspiracy theories, many figures have been labelled as crypto-Jews, including Bin Laden himself (having a Jewish mother), together with other illustrious historical personalities of the last century, such as the Saudi royal family (supposed to descend from Iraqi Jews), the founders of the Turkish Republic, Colonel Reza Khan who seized power in Persia in 1921 (Mostaque 2008 Aangirfan 2012; Livingstone 2011), Colonel Gaddafi, or Bashar al-Assad (Greenfield 2012).

However, in this picture, where the most radical spreaders of conspiracy theories are, or become, part of other plots, ISIS is perhaps the most interesting case. Ever since its appearance in fact, popular Arab opinion has generally seen it as a Mossad invention, and the self-styled caliph Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī as an Israeli or US product.[13]

Of course, the fact that since the Islamic State was proclaimed in 2013, Israel has suffered no real threat, direct (attempted invasion or military attack) or indirect (terrorist outrage) from ISIS has not passed unnoticed, and the domestic and international press have repeatedly posed the question (Berger 2016; Lieber 2016; Benari 2015; Reider 2014; El Shenawi 2015). Evidence has nourished suspicion of collusion between Israel and ISIS, a suspicion supported by some UN reports, which spoke of contacts between IDF and the Syrian opposition

13 He certainly was imprisoned in 2004 at Camp Bucca, an Iraqi prison managed by US forces, as a "civilian internee," being released in December of the same year (McCants 2015; The Islamic State 2014), but international media, based on Iranian and Arab sources, also spread the (false) news that former NSA and CIA agent Edward Snowden revealed that Al-Baghdadi was trained in Israel (Kurtz 2014).

(United Nation 2013, 2014a, 2014b). The conspiracist thesis therefore spread quickly—including in humorous terms[14]—following two main rumours: the first that ISIS consider Israel too strong and dangerous to fight it; the second that the Mossad created ISIS. Israeli intelligence agents would have encouraged Iraqi officers after they were captured by the Americans following the fall of Saddam Hussein to create a revenge organisation: "That is the reason, according to the conspiracy theory, that ISIS is making sure to spread and attack targets at the behest of the Israelis—and making Israel an ally" (Perry 2016).

While it is true that Israel never saw a real threat in ISIS, the position of the country toward the Islamic State organisation emerged clearly in summer 2016, when joint attacks by international and regional forces against the caliphate were increasingly threatening its existence, reducing its territory by 25 per cent between January 2015 (the time of its greatest expansion) and summer 2016. Efraim Inbar (director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies,[15] Professor Emeritus of political studies at Bar-Ilan University and a fellow at the Middle East Forum), in August 2016 stated that "The continuing existence of IS serves a strategic purpose," because "IS can be a useful tool in undermining Tehran's ambitious plan for domination of the Middle East." According to Inbar, IS brutality is the lesser evil, inasmuch "the defeat of IS would encourage Iranian hegemony in the region, buttress Russia's role, and prolong Assad's tyranny" (Inbar 2016: 1–3).

This position was upheld by Israel's military intelligence chief, Major General Herzi Halevy, who on June 6, 2016, declared openly that Israel does not want to see ISIS defeated in the war, stating that Israel prefers ISIS over the Syrian government (Ditz 2016). Also the IDF report, made public in 2015 in Hebrew and recently translated, leaves little room for doubt concerning this matter: Iran tops the list of threats to Israel, followed by Hamas and Hezbollah, repeatedly mentioned in the document, while ISIS appears last and is then ostentatiously ignored (Belfer Center 2016: 14).

In the regional geopolitical context, Israel clearly does not see itself as threatened by ISIS: first because the presence of the organisation fits in with Israel's strategy of conservation; and second because of the military weakness

14 See "ISIS funny parody" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyPRBUMbHHU. Accessed 12/11/2016.

15 The BESA Center "advances a realist, conservative, and Zionist agenda in the search for security and peace for Israel. The center conducts policy-relevant research on strategic subjects, particularly as they relate to the national security and foreign policy of Israel and Middle East regional affairs.... The Center conducts specialized research on contract to the Israeli foreign affairs and defense establishment, and for NATO". http://besacenter.org/about/mission/

of the Islamic state. As a consequence, on the opposite front, an attack by ISIS against Israel and its interest would deprive the caliphate of a *de facto* strategic ally, one with devastating military potential. Israel did not invent ISIS, but it surely believes its existence to be strategically advantageous.

7 Conclusions

On the Middle Eastern conspiracy scene, true and invented plots mix together, making interpretation difficult and masking real plans of dominion.

As we have seen, the myth of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy is an invention with a European background, which found its way into the Middle East through local Christian communities, then through Nazi propaganda, providing support to later conspiracy myths and legitimising them. The political aspect has been a substantial part of the spread of conspiracism, ever since the beginning: the new inner-Arab thread of the myth of the Zionist conspiracy long remained marginal in public debates and only began to gain room from the 1950s onwards, following the foundation of the State of Israel. This clearly shows that the anti-Jewish ideology that marked the conspiracy myth did not find fertile ground in the Islamic world since the social and cultural context was not particularly susceptible to these topics (Mayer 1983; Landau 1969; Scarantino 1986). The myth spread and took root after the first Arab-Israeli war, when the Arab governments (in the first place, Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, Saudi Arabian, and Palestinian) realised its propaganda potential against Zionism and directly promoted its dissemination. In this context, the development of anti-Zionist conspiracy theories, a return to anti-Jewish themes from the Qur'an and the construction of a modern Islamic anti-Judaism go hand in hand.

However, the spread of anti-Zionist conspiracism (which intersects anti-USA conspiracism) must also be understood in the light of the last century of history of the region: one can see how quite a few contemporary conspiracy theories have some foundation in fact, and others are actually true.

Nevertheless, conspiracism is not tendentially at the service of truth. First of all, because of their ultra-reductionist tendency, conspiracy theories distort reality to the point of making any accusation implausible. Second, the general unreliability of conspiracy theories is reinforced by the most extreme and far-fetched hypotheses, which today chase after each other, especially on the Web. Judith Grant, author of an interesting article on UFOs, shows how the most blatant hoaxes can act as diversions: the spread of clearly grotesque and extreme conspiratorial myths (which she calls "grey propaganda") could serve to make

other hypotheses which are not unfounded or even true ones appear dubious, by casting ridicule on those who spread them (Grant 1998).

This comment could hold true for the Middle East: an excess of conspiracism could undermine the credibility of plausible hypotheses as well. For example, to show a disturbing picture, one need only put together the Yinon Plan (which aimed at the breakup of the Middle East) with recent statements by Israeli leaders about instrumental use of ISIS, with the New Middle East Project and the "constructive chaos" promoted by the Bush administration in 2006 (Peters 2006; Nazemroaya 2016; Haass 2006; Ottaway *et al.* Salem 2008), and compare them to the current Middle Eastern scenario: the substantial breakdown of Syria, the sectarian turn in conflicts, and the polarisation of the Sunni-Shiite clash.

However, to speak of a 'plot' behind extremely complex political dynamics (like those currently involving the Middle East), featuring countless variables and where contrasting interests come into play, does not help to decipher the scenarios; on the contrary, it leads to overlooking the underlying processes. In this key, legitimate suspicion, by turning into a culture of suspicion, becomes a tool favouring the positions of some ('conspirators' themselves or internal and external actors on the Middle Eastern political scenarios) or of others (Arab political leaders who, when losing consensus, shift attention to a mythicised 'enemy') (Gray 2010: 125–133; Pipes 359).

As I observed earlier (De Poli 2014: 270), Arab governments lent credibility to, promoted, and still promote conspiracism also as an explanation of recent historical events locating Israel at the heart of their problems. They are not simply fighting an enemy state but an intangible secret worldwide organisation: Zionism and the establishment of Israel are not a mere product of international and regional political developments but the diabolical outcome of a subterranean plot carried on for thousands of years with wickedness and perfidy by Jews, and still at work today, the latest stage being the supposed creation of ISIS. Such an outlook, from a populist and demagogic point of view, gives a new balance to the relationships of force between the actors in the conflict. But in the meantime, this approach ends up by playing in favour of the authors of real 'plots', since their historical and political dimension evaporates amidst the ridicule of countless conspiracy theories and of grey propaganda.

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CHAPTER 15

A Fantastic People and Its Enemies: An Analysis of an Emerging Albanian Mythology

Cecilie Endresen

1 Introduction: All Good Things are Albanian

A conspicuous feature of Albanian culture is the prevalence of conspiracy theories. This chapter explores some versions of this theme in popular myths about the Albanians and their enemies. This discourse combines speculations about religion, society, politics, and cosmos in intricate ways and is characterised by its underdog rhetoric and "conspirituality" (Ward and Voas 2011). As we shall see, the complex of conspiracy theories I will refer to as "Pelasgianism" thrives among ethnic Albanians, arguably among the most secularised and religiously heterogeneous populations in Europe.

The basic plot is as follows: the Albanians are the heirs to the pre-classical Pelasgians, their civilisation and primordial religion. This gives them special insights and an unparalleled talent for religious tolerance. Albanian is envisaged as the Ur-language and the gateway to a perennial wisdom, enabling Albanian-speakers everywhere to unravel the mysteries, enlighten humanity, and rectify injustices. At the moment, the world is out of balance, due to malevolent actors and forces that deny Albanians their freedom and suppress the truth. The conspirators are first and foremost associated with other Balkan nations, especially the Greeks and Serbs, who persecute Albanians, steal their property, falsify history, and endanger their identity. A tenet of this discourse is that Albanians in general and 'Pelasgologists' in particular possess the key to disclose secret connections and hidden meaning in world history, and, in some versions, also about cosmic secrets and the nature of God. This knowledge is dangerous to current elites, and therefore forbidden and suppressed, the story goes.

The producers of Pelasgic myths and conspiracy theories and their readership constitute a decentralised, unorganised network with limited social praxis.[1] Their ideas thrive mainly on the fringes of academia, and their supporters lament

1 In Tirana in 2012, there was for example a "first Pelasgic world congress," organised by the Centre of Pelasgic studies. This event gathered 17 "scholars of the Pelasgo-Illyrian-Albanian antiquity" who used "facts and arguments" to shed light on the "origins of the Albanians" and

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that their "scientific" insights are ignored by the institutions, which confirms their conspiracy theories. The 'experts' in the field can be categorised as "epistemological individualists" (Wallis 1976) who work for "the recognition of true facts" (de Rapper 2009) by revealing secret signs, patterns, and symbols in culture and nature. This quasi-scholarly system relies on a meta-empirical framework of meaning, has its own axioms, hypotheses, and methods, authoritative studies and commentary literature, authors, and readership, and sub-branches and specialisations. Many of the authors from Albania are men born during the first years of communism (1944–1991), often teachers or people with an academic background in another discipline than the one in which they purport to be 'researchers'. One example is when a respected translator dabbles in quantum physics to prove that Albanian is a "Messianic language" (Zheji 2015).

Pelasgic conspiracy theories accommodate and transform a myriad of anti-establishment conspiracy theories from global religious and political discourses, and vice versa. They address a wide range of problems and anxieties that many Albanians have experienced, and are easily adapted to individual stories and local circumstances. Many are open and sympathetic to at least parts of the Pelasgic stock of ideas or believe that modern Albanians descend from a pre-Hellenic Balkan people called the Pelasgians (IPSOS 2011). Texts with uncritical Pelasgic references are quite common in pan-Albanian Internet forums and diaspora community groups. Conspiracy theories of this kind have also sifted into mainstream Albanian nationalism, attracting a considerable following.

Pelasgianism is part of Albanian pop culture and illustrates the creativity in symbolically dealing with contemporary dilemmas. The late modern wish for 'authenticity' makes people embrace narratives of the past and create a sense of continuity between past, present, and future (Selberg 1999: 41, my translation). After experiences with communist modernisation, brutal secularisation, social disruption, and radical cultural shifts, Pelasgian theories recreate purpose, meaning, and continuity and symbolically heal the wounds. In what follows, I will explore this grand, religiously complex conspiracy theory, which is so flexible that it is able to Albanianise everything from Dogon creation myths to David Bowie and the Druids. But first, some background.

2 The Mysterious Albanians

> A lot of Albanians tend to write both poetry and prose which has no relation to anything. It is beautiful in Albanian but you can't translate

the "Pelasgic civilisation in the Mediterranean and Europe since the dawn of human history" (Hoxha 2012).

> it … there is no tradition of nonfiction, of writing history as neutral history. Pretty much, all books that are published in Albania are with people's opinions of history. Not what happened, but my opinion of what happened … if you listen to the news on TV, on the radio, you quite often have commentaries about what happened without them actually telling you what happened.
>
> ROBERT ELSIE, translator of Albanian literature, in Limani 2016.

Most people with Albanian as their first language today define themselves as Albanians (IPSOS 2011). As the only unifying force across many deep, criss-crossing social and cultural divisions (Clayer 2007), the language has been seen as the hallmark of ethnic identity since the rise of Albanian nationalism in the late nineteenth century. Albanian is a distinct Indo-European language that has existed in the Balkans at least since antiquity, but the oldest known literature in Albanian is from 1555. What proto-Albanian might have been, remains speculative since no direct linguistic link to the Illyrian or other ancient Balkan languages can be firmly established (Matzinger 2009). Ideas of the language therefore play a central role in the Pelasgic conspiracy theories under scrutiny here. So do reflections of inter-religious relations.

The history of the Balkans as a religious crossroads is reflected in the Albanian-speaking population in the western Balkans, which is predominantly Muslim but with substantial pockets of Orthodox and Catholic Christians.[2] Today, the Albanian-speaking population in the western Balkan states is one of the largest in the area,[3] and ethnic Albanians constitute one of the largest diaspora communities in the EU. There are also old Albanian-speaking communities in Italy (Arbëresh, Italo-Albanese) and Greece (Arvanites), who identify as respectively Italians and Greeks.

There is still very little scholarly literature on Albanian language, culture, and history, and the scarcity of sources leaves ample room for speculation. This makes Albanian pop culture particularly susceptible to relevant conspiracy theories, which provide answers to existential questions like "Who am I?," "Where do I belong?," and most importantly in this context, "Why do I suffer?"

2 In the Republic of Albania, approximately 2/3 of the population are Muslims and 1/3 Christian (mainly Albanian Orthodox and Roman Catholic) (Endresen 2014). Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and FYR of Macedonia are predominantly Muslim, with a few Catholics, and in Montenegro the Muslim-Catholic ratio is *c.* 4:1. Greek Arvanites (Albanian-speaking) are Greek Orthodox after the expulsion of the Muslim population. Italian Arbëresh are Orthodox and Catholic.

3 Approximately 3.3 million in Albania, 2 million in Kosovo and Montenegro, 600.000 in FYR Macedonia, and several hundred thousands in Italy and Greece.

2.1 *A Traumatic Past: Crises and Conspiracies*

> People were afraid of each other and saw everyone as a spy.
>
> THE POET DRITERO AGOLLI AT THE PARTY CONGRESS, Tirana, 1991, quoted in Kosta 1995.

The fact that Albanians have been at the receiving end of real political conspiracies, for example when the Christian Balkan states several times in the twentieth century conspired to carve up Albanian-inhabited lands and share them among themselves (Bartl 1995: 133), give nationalist conspiracy theories a shroud of credibility. In "Balkanise" the Balkans have given their own name to a definition of fragmentation, and it is still a hotbed for political intrigue, notorious for its contested frontiers, authoritarianism, state collapses, corruption, turmoil, violence, war, and ethnic cleansing. In several Balkan countries, Albanian language and identity have been discouraged and sometimes brutally suppressed, and most Albanians outside Albania itself have lived in states that have pursued forms of anti-Albanian policies. Among the hundreds of thousands of Albanian immigrants and seasonal workers in Italy and Greece, many assume Christian names and identities to minimise social stigma.

Even in the close to ethnically homogeneous Republic of Albania, people were brutally oppressed during the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha (1944–1985). His idiosyncratic and isolationist national-communist regime was also more radical than any other communist regime in terms of its efforts to eradicate traditional social structures and religion in all its forms. To instil paranoia in the people was a deliberate strategy of the regime: there was no such thing as a private sphere, spies were lurking everywhere, and the imminent danger of invasion by all the enemies was visualised through hundreds of thousands of concrete bunkers in the landscape. From 1967, all religious practices were banned, religious institutions shut down, mosques and churches destroyed or profaned, books burnt, and the clergy persecuted. In many ways, the religious traditions in Albania have been eroded and privatised, and the reconstruction of the religious communities is still a work in process (Endresen 2012). After brutal communist secularisation processes, Albanian citizens were in many ways de-traditionalised and culturally disenfranchised.

2.2 *A New Religious Laboratory*

'Pelasgianism' is a new pan-Albanian mythology, a symbolic resource shaped by and adapted to the social context of those who produce and use it. Its appeal lies in the way it integrates widely different ways of being Albanian, connects a host of unrelated events, and gives significance to the ordinary and mundane.

To a larger extent than traditional religious and nationalist conspiracy theories, Pelasgianism is able to accommodate post-communist experiences, migration, and globalisation. At the same time, it is a product of these events.

Adherents of Pelasgic 'theories' mix and match nationalist tales of origins with religious and spiritual elements derived from different symbolic systems and sources, including legends, fairy-tales, and the 'old' Albanian religions: Islam (including a range of Sufi traditions), Orthodox Christianity, and Roman Catholicism. Moreover, it incorporates many other religious elements, such as Theosophy, ancient Egyptian mythology, Mayan religion, Buddhism, New Age, neo-paganism, and UFO religions, and in a new way. Even the most secular versions of the Pelasgic myth presuppose a meta-empirical framework of meaning, use epistemic strategies associated with esoteric thinking, and rely on rejected knowledge (Hammer 2001).

The master narrative of Albanian nationalism is that hostile forces and actors will exploit religious differences in order to divide and conquer the nation. This fear of the 'religious knife' comes in many ideological and religious trappings and permeates Pelasgianism in many different ways. In order to illustrate the remarkably eclectic, syncretised, and glocalised character of Pelasgic conspiracy theories, I shall approach them as core narratives of an emerging and alternative religious paradigm for Albanians. My primary sources consist of texts considered 'sources of knowledge' in the Pelasgic discourse, particularly bestselling books, but also TV programmes, social media, blogs, and other online material. I also rely on extensive fieldwork on religion among Albanians conducted in 2005–2006 and 2012–2014, including interviews and informal conversations with Pelasgic enthusiasts. My broader understanding of the topic comes from many years as a researcher in the Albanian-speaking regions in the Balkans.

3 The Basic Myth: A Divine People and Its Sacrifices

> The Pelasgians-Illyrians-Albanians are a divine people. Their language (Pelasgic-Illyrian-Albanian) is a divine and universal language, the language that was used by all the peoples on earth from the time of the Prophet Adam and until 3400 years ago.
>
> SKËNDER RIZAJ, 2013.

Ancient Greek literature sometimes refers to an autochthonous, pre-Greek people called "Pelasgians." In the *Iliad*, for example, Homer refers to the "noble

Pelasgi" (2009: Book X) and the "Pelasgian Lord Zeus" (Book XVI). A 'Pelasgic' ancestry has invariably been promoted by German and Greek as well as Albanian nationalists, but theories about any ethnic and linguistic continuity with such a people remain speculative and outdated. The purpose was to legitimise claims of nationhood, territory, and autochthony in Europe (Clayer 2008), which is still an important function in Albanian discourses about the Pelasgians. After Albania's independence in 1912, the Pelasgic thesis became secondary to that of the Albanians' stated Illyrian forefathers, whose existence and whereabouts in the region are well documented. Theories proclaiming Pelasgic ancestry remained an unofficial undercurrent during the communist period, but resurfaced after the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1991.

Contemporary Pelasgianism construes the Pelasgians as a chosen people, outstandingly gifted, with superhuman qualities or of extraterrestrial origins, and with a direct genetic and cultural connection to modern Albanians. As the first people in the Balkans and in Europe, and sometimes the first people on Earth, these proto-Albanians ruled vast empires and created glorious civilisations in Europe and on other continents, thousands of years ago. Ancient civilisations, which are falsely represented under other names such as Roman, Greek or Minoean, were essentially Albanian products. However, very few are able to acquire such a deep understanding of the true connections, because at some point there was a fall, caused by superstition, politics, or abuse of power, and the pure, perfect, and non-fanatical Ur-religion was corrupted. Varying concretisations as to which religious tradition has remained most authentic or most detrimental depend on the author's background and concerns, but foreign influence is inexorably to blame. Degeneration is mainly associated with the intrusion of primitive "oriental" tribes, such as Serbs and Greeks, who destroyed ancient Pelasgian texts, stole their material and cultural property, and passed it off as their own, but in an inferior form, and have since then tried to cover up their crime.

There is nevertheless a glimmer of hope in the story, and collective emancipation is within reach: Pelasgic insights and talents have survived among Albanians, whose ancestry, culture, and language contain perennial wisdom with the key to unravel the mysteries. The Truth is out there, in principle accessible to everyone who speaks or reads Albanian and who has the *will* to understand. To see the big picture, one must look closer and search deeper and dismantle the systemic lies upheld by elites and other peoples who fear the truth: that the modern Albanians have the key to a glorious future.

3.1 *Stigmatised Knowledge: Emic Theory and Methods*

The purpose of the conspiracy theorists whose ideas we study here is to lay bare the purported proto-Albanian vestiges in contemporary and ancient cultures

and languages, reveal the 'truth', (re)discover ancient wisdom from purported ancestors, and achieve a higher form of knowledge. As such, the forms of historiography, archaeology, and linguistics in Pelasgianism represent a form of rejected knowledge (Webb 1971) and esoteric science (Hammer 2001: 325).

Nineteenth-century historians of religion with their all-encompassing theories remain influential in what in the following I will refer to as 'Pelasgological' analyses of religious development. A common idea is that the Pelasgic Ur-religion lived on in classical mythologies and other wisdom traditions. Prestigious ancient languages such as Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit are Pelasgic, and Albanian language skills enables a person to grasp the true meaning of ancient alphabets and rituals. A recurrent theme is that the Greek oracles spoke Albanian, and Greek authorities are said to cover up archaeological excavations that confirm this 'fact'.

To Pelasgic enthusiasts, language and ethnic identity are inseparable. Ideas of racial purity and whiteness are prominent. A historian in Tirana defines the Albanians as "the most beautiful race on earth" (Kocaqi 2009a) and uses phrenological methods to back up her ideas of Europe's "Pelasgo-Illyrian" origins (Kocaqi 2009b). Often, one finds references to Blavasky's idea of "root races" that inhabited now lost continents and represent different stages in human evolution (Blavatsky 1888).

The emphasis on proto-languages is quite common in pseudo-histories, especially when tied to nation building, and in the days of early modern imperialism many modern European languages were at some point purported to be the language of Adam. In the Albanian case, the language has been the only objectively unifying factor in the entire Albanian nation-building project. The claim that "the Pelasgians spoke and wrote Albanian" (Abazaj 2013) is a form of "alternative linguistics" and relies greatly on nineteenth-century philological theories. The method is to demonstrate Pelasgic vestiges in modern and ancient languages through alternative etymologies and comparison between superficially similar names. With such "acrobatic speculation" (Rukaj 2007), Pelasgic experts manage to Albanianise any given hero, alphabet, toponym, group, object or religion, thereby claiming it as 'theirs'.

4 Those Who Search for the Truth

> I've seen it on the internet, ancient history. It is believed that the hieroglyphs have Pelasgic origins since the Pelasgians were the first people. Atlantis is in Durrës [a coastal city in Albania], because Durrës is very old.
>
> "LANDI," Albanian seasonal worker in Greece, October 3, 2013.

Pelasgic enthusiasts see their people as defenceless victims of history. Books based on this plot are bestsellers, such as Robert d'Angely's *Enigma* (1998), which is available in most Albanian bookshops. Pelasgic theories flourish on the Internet, particularly among diaspora Albanians (Rukaj 2007). Some websites and videos have hundreds of thousands of visitors, for example Nadir Mura's (2013) TV programme *Enigma—Sekretet e Tokës Shqiptare* (Enigma – the secrets of the Albanian land) with more than 165,000 views, while Facebook pages with names such as "Illyrian-Pelasgic Renaissance" (Rilindja Iliro-Pellazge) receive 23,000 likes or groups such as "Pelasgians-Illyrians-Albanians" (Pellazgët-Ilirët-Shqiptarët) have more than 14,000 members. Apparently, many consider Pelasgological books as genuine scholarship, and books with titles such as *The Pelasgians, our Repudiated Origin* (Pilika 2005) or *The Messianic Role of Albanian: The Destruction of the Tower of Babel*" (Zheji 2015) are found on the "history" or "language" shelf in bookshops. Reviews of Pelasgic publications in mainstream media tend to be completely uncritical, and very few critics debunk their claims in public. The influence of Pelasgic research nevertheless seems to be on the increase in Albanian academia.

The Pelasgic myth has a similar pattern and meaning as the mainstream and officially sanctioned myth of Illyrian ancestry. Both are essentialising myths of ethnic continuity that represent the nation as homogenous, monolithic, and perennial.[4] The Illyrian myth, however, is more accepted within academic circles and by official Albania, while the Pelasgic myth is mainly a pop-cultural phenomenon. However, Pelasgic myths do not exclude the Illyrian continuity thesis since the Pelasgians in any case are construed as proto-Illyrians.

The Illyrian myth is to some extent associated with the Socialist Party of Albania, the formal successor of Enver Hoxha's Labour Party, while the Pelasgic myth, with its emphasis on the nation's 'deeper' roots, has more support in the Democratic Party, the Socialists' main rival (Lubonja 2008). Nevertheless, the funeral of Petro Zheji, whose main contribution was to 'prove' that Sanskrit was Pelasgic, was attended by the Socialist Prime Minister and his Minister of Culture (Çaushi 2015).

The Pelasgic endeavour is primarily discursive. There are, however, a few elements that may become ritualised along neo-pagan lines at a later stage, such as efforts to 'reconstruct' a Pelasgic calendar (Guri 2015; see also Makeeff 2014) or define existing customs and rituals as Pelasgic (Guri 2013; Xharra 2015). Some Pelasgic enthusiasts participate in the annual pilgrimage to Mount Tomor in central Albania, which according to popular belief is the home of the gods (see Clayer 1996). Tomor was invented as a Pelasgic cultic place at the end of

4 M. Rukaj, interview with the author, Tirana, November 20, 2012.

the Ottoman period (Clayer 2017). Pilgrims visit the Bektashi (Sufi) sanctuary of Hussein's half-brother Abbas Ali on the mountain top, which Pelasgianism construes as a Zeus temple with the oracle of Dodona.

4.1 *The Canon*

While Pelasgic theories have been around since the nineteenth century, alternative religious currents such as Theosophy and New Age spirituality were practically unknown among Albanians in Albania and Yugoslavia prior to the fall of communism. From the 1990s, Pelasgological books written in Western Europe and Greece were translated into Albanian and became bestsellers (de Rapper 2009). Whether any of these 'classical' authors belonged to any 'cultic milieu' is uncertain, and it is unclear whether they were in contact with each other. What is sure is that they increasingly identified with ethnic Albanians in other countries, had Albanian as their first language,[5] or had Albanian family connections. These authoritative texts also reveal a certain familiarity with esotericism and theosophy, which might have triggered their interest in the Albanian 'enigma' in the first place.

The growing corpus of Pelasgic texts is highly intertextual, and the works by Robert d'Angely (1998) and Matieu Aref (2007, 2008) in France, and Aristheidis Kollias (Aristidh Kola) (2003, 2008) and Guiseppe Catapano (Xhuzepe Katapano) (2007) from the old Albanian-speaking communities in Greece and Italy respectively, constitute a sort of Pelasgological canon. Other texts elaborate on their ideas and add new elements, for example ideas from the Swiss Erich von Däniken (2000) or references to the war in Kosovo (1999). A common denominator is that the author's own dialect, homestead, and religious tradition are construed as closest to the original.

4.2 *The Language of the Gods*

Historically, Greek-Albanian identities were often rather blurred or irrelevant. In the early nineteenth century Arvanites fought in the Greek struggle for independence, and many of the Greek national heroes spoke Arvanitika. In the course of the nineteenth century, Greek and Albanian nationalists began to compete for their loyalties, and many Albanophones in northern Greece, particularly Muslims, developed a political Albanian national identity. Official Greece, however, has always insisted that the Arvanites are ethnic Greeks, and not just Greek citizens. Before World War I, the Greek state's Hellenisation project became increasingly brutal against minorities, especially against Muslims and Albanians, culminating in the violent expulsion and genocide of the

5 'Arbëresh' in Italy and 'Arvanitika' in Greece are different dialects of Albanian.

Muslim Cham Albanians after World War II (Mazower 2000). It is also quite common for Greeks to deny the existence of Albanian history in Greece, or to claim that Albanian language and culture have no history, but are 'artificial creations' of Albanian independence in 1912.[6] Today, Arvanites in northern Greece usually say they have 'Greek blood' and nothing to do with Albanians.[7] Greece still does not recognise ethnic and linguistic minorities as such.

The influential Pelasgologist Aristheidis Kollias (1944–2000) from central Greece grew up in an Arvanitic family at a time of strong Greek assimilation policies. Kollias' conspiracy theory must be understood in the context of oppression of Albanians and Muslims in Greece. This includes cultural oppression, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, and with the Greek state's subsequent concealment of any historical Albanian presence in the country (Kretsi 2002, Baltsiotis 2011). A lawyer by profession, Kollias dedicated his life to the promotion of Arvanitic culture, wrote several books on the topic, edited newspapers, headed the Arvanites Association, and was in close contact with Albanian-speaking communities in all corners of the world. In the 1990s, Kollias became an ardent critic of the Milošević regime's oppression and persecution of Albanians in Kosovo, and was later awarded by state leaders in Albania and Kosovo.

Kollias' books were first published in Greek and only later translated into Albanian, and have acquired an authoritative status in pro-Pelasgic circles. Defining the Arvanites as heirs to the ancient Pelasgians, Kollias picked up themes from nineteenth-century theories that had emphasised the original sameness of Greeks and Albanians (compare de Rapper 2009). In Kollias' vision, the Albanians have lived in the area since time immemorial (2003). The Greek Arvanites are a "chosen people" (2003: 8–9), descendants of the glorious people who created civilisation 10,000 years ago. In his hyperdiffusionist vision, important elements of Pelasgian civilisation can be found as far away as China, but are most authentic among modern Arvanites, the "purest representatives of the Pelasgic race" (8–9). At the same time, most contemporary Greeks have a hidden Arvanitic background, and whenever a "majority of the population consists of Pelasgians, that civilisation has a Pelasgic character (298).

Kollias' main argument is that "the language of the [Greek] Gods" was Arvanitika/Albanian (2003: 316). Through alternative etymological analysis of the Greek cosmogony, he Albanianises the Olympic pantheon and reconstructs the pure Pelasgic religion as completely logical and protoscientific. Accordingly, it

6 Interview with anonymised sources in Greek diplomatic circles, Albania, December 13, 2012.
7 Interviews August 2013 and September 2014.

became the "ideological source of the Greek democracy" (25), and in contrast with later religions, it never harboured "fanaticism and hate" (18).

The degeneration began when ancient Greek philosophers misinterpreted the Pelasgic wisdom due to the detrimental influence from "oriental theology" and "fanaticism" (Kollias 2003: 292). Foreign elements such as magic and superstition took over, and Pelasgic religion acquired a "priestly and theological character" (292, 313), resulting in a spiritual weakening and "Oriental" pessimism and fatalism (305–306).

Kollias' arguments are profoundly orientalist: to him, anything from infectious diseases to religious fanaticism can be attributed to Middle Eastern and Semitic influence, and contemporary Greece vacillates between the "'enchanted' Orient and the negro-American West" (2003: 20–21). The Arvanites' culture and language, by contrast, has remained uncontaminated, but are "on the verge of extinction" (315).

Kollias' Pelasgic model symbolically construes sameness with the Greek majority, but simultaneously makes the minority morally superior. By the same token, his approach bridges the gap between 'Greek' and 'Albanian' and allows people like himself to be both. The author's biography illustrates this identity trajectory from a local Greek and Arvanitic activist to a pan-Albanian hero.

Feeding into Albanian resentment towards the Greeks, Kollias' symbolic constructions of Albanians as the heirs of a higher civilisation that the Greeks later stole, has a special appeal to the many Albanians who have felt inferior and humiliated in Greece, where they are stereotyped as poor, primitive, backward, and criminal (de Rapper 2009: 64). Pelasgianism overturns constructions of Albanians as primitive intruders with no history or culture, allowing Albanian-speakers in the country to identify its heroes, 'own' a glorious civilisation admired by the rest of the world, and consider everything they appreciate with Greece to be 'Albanian'.

4.3 *Logos is Albanian*

One of the most widely quoted Pelasgic works is *Tut Spoke Albanian* by Guiseppe Catapano (2007 [1984]), a philologist with an Arbëresh background. The book was originally published in Italian in Rome in 1984 and refers to the ongoing destruction of religious traditions in Albania during the communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha. Catapano is deeply concerned about this and connects it to other attempts to conceal the true nature of things.

In Catapano's book, nineteenth-century nationalist theories of origins circulating among the Arbëresh are combined with elements from Theosophy, the theory of correspondences, magnetism, numerology, and kabbalah, resulting in mystical interpretations of the ancient alphabets, languages, and mythology.

Catapano has also discovered the "heavenly transcendence that exists inside us," in every living cell (Catapano 2007: 11).

The main narrative goes as follows: after the catastrophe of Atlantis, its inhabitants survived. These were the Illyrians, who competed for influence with other races (black, red, yellow). One of them was the ancient Egyptian god Tut, who spoke Albanian. Catapano demonstrates this by pointing out that Tut's name, "Thot," means "[he] says" in Albanian ("thotë", pronounced "thot"). Because Tut created science, wisdom, culture, and civilisation, he paved the way for the ancient sages (for example Moses, Rama, Orpheus, and Jesus). Albanian was the sacred language, but the Egyptians concealed the Illyrian roots of their wisdom tradition. A consequence of this is that the tradition was incomplete, and the modern people have "lost the key" (Catapano 2007: 166). Catapano, who has (re)discovered "humanity's highest guide," wants to "rebuild the temple of true knowledge" (165–166), which is "vital for humanity," especially in these "modern times" when speculative, manic politics, crime, prostitution, and immorality prevail (17). The key is contained in Arbëresh/Albanian history and language, and to be in possession of this knowledge is both "bold and dangerous" (7).

Catapano's concern with corruption and degeneration might be one reason his book also speaks to post-communist Albanians across the Adriatic. While Catapano himself referred to the "Albanian-Illyrian" character of everything, the Albanian translation asserts that he means "Pelasgian." In this way, it translates the message into a new, post-Communist Pelasgic discourse.

4.4 *Fear of Fanaticism*

A common denominator of Pelasgic myths is the critique of religious 'fanaticism' — a common feature of the enemy. The Albanian urge to prove they are not *fanatikë* has been around for at least a century, and Muslim Albanians in particular have been eager to emphasise their lack of religious hostility. Not only did the whole nation-building project depend on the goodwill of Christian minorities, but also it was urgent to legitimise claims to nationhood, autochthony, and independence for the predominantly Muslim nation in the eyes of the Great Powers. Albanians have shared the common fear that their Islamic affiliation is an obstacle for European integration and acceptance, or that Muslims will be banned from entering the USA (Rucker *et al.* 2016). The rise of Islamic fundamentalism and global terrorist networks has made it all the more important to demonstrate that Albanians are not 'fanatic' Muslims with a violent nature. Accusations of Albanians being jihadists have also been widespread among nationalists in the Christian majority nations in the Balkans, where Albanians in stereotypical representations are often associated with guns, guerrillas, crime, mafia, trafficking, and revenge.

In Pelasgianism, religious traditions other than the mythmaker's own are more likely to display 'fanatic' elements. For Pelasgic enthusiasts with a Muslim background, their homely Islamic tradition is often presented as the cure against foreign, 'fanatic' forms of Islam (Hushi n.d.: 96). But also many Christian tend to construe Albanian Islam as special, for example because it is Aryan, that Albanian Muslims were Islamised against their will, that they drink wine and eat pork, and in all respects are better than non-Albanian Muslims. In any case, each version of the Pelasgian myths reveals considerable information about the author's religious, political, and geographical background and interests.

4.5 *Payback Time*

> Other people have always ruined things for the Albanians as a people. The only thing we have left is our language. Nothing else. Only the language. Everything is miserable in Albania. Everything.
>
> "LANDI," Albanian seasonal worker in Greece, October 3, 2013.

Albanian self-esteem is often undermined by discrimination, poverty, and lack of membership in the prestigious European Union, and an inferiority complex due to low international prestige is widespread (Rukaj 2007). The Pelasgic discourse reflects many of the identity debates that are going on simultaneously and on different levels among Albanians in the Balkans and in the diaspora and includes a host of smaller stories and myths about other nations or about academic, political, and religious elites. The big conspiracy theory is that others have manipulated evidence of Pelasgic anteriority and repudiated Albanian claims of property and continuity. This injustice explains the misery that has befallen the nation ever since. Since Albanians created the "whole civilisation of the white race" (Kocaqi 2009a: 17), it is of outmost importance that the whole world is informed of the nation's glorious past. However, others are so jealous that they have tried to portray the Albanians as a "barbarian nation that does not deserve respect" (3).

Against this backdrop, Pelasgic conspiracy theorists seek to enlighten the world of the enormous sacrifices the Albanians have made to protect civilisation. By creating fantastic stories about how the Albanians have kept inimical forces such as Atlantides, Byzantines, Turks, oriental culture, politicised religion, fanaticism and so on at bay, they argue that they have protected other Europeans and enabled their progress, but paid the price: heinous treatment, especially in the twentieth century. So far, the Albanians' sacrifice is not acknowledged by the rest of the world, and nobody wants to admit that "the whole of humanity is indebted." The world should acknowledge the Albanian contributions

and abilities and use them for the benefit of humanity, but this is not happening. Instead, their neighbours have continuously occupied them, denied them their rights, persecuted them, and 'Europe', created by the Pelasgians in the first place, denies them their rightful access. In this way, Pelasgianism is also a conspiracy theory that deals with unfulfilled dreams of European integration.

4.6 *Albanian Underdogs: Exclusion and Exceptionalism*

As "transnational ancestors" (de Rapper 2009: 64), not limited by the geographical span of the historical Illyrians, a Pelasgic ancestry enables Albanians to emphasise sameness and identification with a range of other peoples, traditions, and places in all corners of the world where Albanians reside. This is an expansionist as well as an inclusivist strategy, which places Albanians at the heart of world history. By turning the Etruscans into Pelasgians, Albanian migrants in Italy can symbolically claim a certain ownership to Italian culture and legitimate their presence on the peninsula, or feel more attached to Scandinavia when they 'discover' that it was part of the 'Pelasgian Minoan Civilisation' in the bronze age or that Norway means "I have Norwegians in my heart" in Pelasgian (Peza and Peza 2016).[8]

Pelasgic conspiracism symbolically distinguishes the pure, authentic, civilised 'Albanian' elements from the inauthentic, threatening, uncivilised aspects of malevolent or ignorant others. At the same time, the non-Albanian 'Other' retains a certain ambiguity: by having stolen, distorted, or inherited certain Pelasgic features, the Other has a positive potential. As an identity discourse, Pelasgianism creates a variety of imagined and symbolic communities across cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries, and construes a 'transnational space' in which Albanians can transform their marginality "into centrality and superiority" (de Rapper 2009: 66). While they define the mythmaker as superior to a partly hostile majority in the host society, it also opens the door to other cultures and facilitates integration and language learning. Pelasgianism is thus, in essence, a multifaceted conspiracy theory fuelled by exclusion, and expresses a profound wish to *belong*.

8 The philological 'proof' is as follows: Norvegji (the standard Albanian name for Norway) = norët i ve n'gji (I have the Nors in my bosom) = I have them in my heart. The Pelasgian etymology of the capital Oslo is construed as Os lo = Osht lon = is left. Similar acrobatics shows that Scandinavia means 'we need it, it's worth it'. Also an inscription in Kongsberg "confirms the presence of the Pelasgian Minoan Civilisation in Scandinavia" (Peza and Peza 2016).

5 New Age, New Conspiracy Theories

> I believe in God, but I don't know what God is. Religions are instruments created to control humanity and to install fear in people. All religions have been spread with the sword and have a criminal record.
>
> "LANDI," October 3, 2013.

In Pelasgianism, 'old-school' Albanian conspiracy theories about religion and politics meet New Age conspirituality. Pelasgic conspiracism tells of denied claims to anteriority and autochthony, ownership to ancient culture and continuity with ancient peoples. These stories are not much different from those found in other forms of nationalism in the Balkans, but Pelasgianism has an additional emphasis on hidden knowledge, picked and mixed from new and old religious traditions that are domesticated and immediately Albanianised. As such, these myths illustrate the cultural adaption of Albanian history and tradition to contemporary Western pop culture. Pelasgianism demonstrates the general compatibility of conspiracy theories, even when their claims appear mutually exclusive or draw on historically and geographically distinct cultures such as the Malian and the Mayan.

6 Conclusion

To conclude: in conspiracism, anything can happen. The appeal of the Pelasgic paradigm is that it gives the underdog the upper hand: by virtue of being Albanian and speaking the language, Albanians are by definition better than everyone else. In addition, perceived unjust treatment might be easier to endure if it is seen as an expression of fear and envy. The conspiracy theories also enable Albanians to understand and control the unfolding drama. Above all, Pelasgic myths turn one of the poorest and most powerless populations in Europe into the masters of the universe.

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CHAPTER 16

Was Aristotle an Anti-Semitic Alien? Conspiracy Theory, Ufology, and the Colonisation of the Past in Contemporary Greece

Tao T. Makeeff

1 Introduction

In the early years of the twenty-first century, international media have reported that Greece is the most anti-Semitic country in Europe (Haaretz 2014). The reports were based on surveys by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), according to which an enormous 69 per cent of Greek respondents harboured anti-Semitic views. The results of the survey, which placed Greece above Iran (56 per cent), indicated that Greece is almost twice as anti-Semitic as France (37 per cent), the second most anti-Semitic country in the European part of the survey. Despite some critique of the ADL survey, both by officials of the Jewish communities in Greece and by those who underline the potential bias of an explicitly pro-Israel organisation in surveying anti-Semitism (Samel 2014; Weiss 2014), it is generally agreed that there is a relatively high presence of anti-Semitism in Greek society, predominantly among national-conservatives, and in a particularly aggressive form among the radical right-wing supporters of political parties such as Golden Dawn and LA.O.S. (Laikos Orthodoxos Synagermos). The 2014 survey "Perceptions about the Holocaust and Antisemitism in Greece" received similar media attention.[1] It indicated that anti-Semitism in Greece often takes the form of narratives about a Jewish conspiracy. The survey also concluded that the belief in conspiracy theories was on the increase in Greece, with low social trust, lack of education, and a sense of victimisation as the main reasons cited (Zikakou 2014), and it found that there was evidence of a correlation between anti-Semitism and belief in conspiracy theories:

> The survey found that almost half (47.3 percent) of those who tend not to believe in conspiracy theories also disagreed with the assertion that Jews exploit the Holocaust to gain influence. Specifically, 34 percent of

1 Carried out by the International Hellenic University, the University of Oxford, and the Macedonian University.

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> them strongly disagreed with this statement. In contrast, 76.3 percent of those with a strong belief in conspiracy theories agreed that Jews exploit the Holocaust to gain influence. Of that group, 51 percent strongly agreed with the claim.
>
> VAN VERSENDAAL 2014

However, I suggest that in order to understand the presence of anti-Semitism, the shape it assumes, and the contexts in which it thrives, one must also look beyond demographic, educational, and psychological factors, to the specific roots of a given country's national narratives about its own history.

This chapter investigates points of convergence between anti-Semitism, nationalism, and conspiracy theory in contemporary Greece by narrowing in on a subset of Greek anti-Semitic conspiracy theories concerning the so-called Epsilon Team (*Epsilon Omada*), a secret society that is described as having origins in both ancient Greece and outer space. A particular focus is placed on the role of the reception of Greek antiquity as a key element in this conspiracy theory. I have chosen to refer to subscription to this theory as 'epsilonism' and to the subscribers as 'epsilonists'.[2] However, these are intended as analytical terms, and do not refer to any delineated community. Rather, they point to a fluid and dynamic convergence of actors and discourses within a wider milieu. In the following I offer a short introduction to some of the most important aspects in understanding Greek nationalism, and thus the context of Greek anti-Semitism, namely the construction of pseudo-historiographic accounts about religious homogeneity and cultural continuity, followed by an introduction to the historical development of the Epsilon Team conspiracy theory. Finally, in an analysis of the origins of the two main components of this conspiracy theory—the idea of an evil Jewish conspiracy, and that of a secret group that protects 'true Greeks' against this threat—I suggest that both of these ideas originate in a Christian world view.

2 Historical Dynamics of Religion and Nationalism in Greece

The use of pseudo-history is widespread in Greece and plays a key role in narratives about UFOs, extraterrestrials, and alien technology, which in turn are often intrinsically connected to the propagation of Hellenocentrism, racism,

2 Although this term is also used to refer to a fictional religion in the computer game *Grand Theft Auto*, my use of the term refers exclusively to the theories about the Greek Epsilon Team. For further information about GTA epsilonism, see: http://www.epsilonprogram.com/.

and anti-Semitism. This kind of strategical use of the past, fashioned to fit the needs of a particular ideology or cause has been referred to as a "colonization of the past" by Professor Norman Levitt.[3] He describes the phenomenon as a "cultural habit" that

> erupts for many reasons in many situations, but which reposes, finally, on the outspoken and probably unconscious assumption that the past is, indeed, open for colonization; that it is receptive to the impress of one's concerns, conceits, or obsessions; that it is truly malleable and can always be molded nearer to the heart's desire.
>
> LEVITT 2006: 261

The idea that the past is indeed a malleable thing, which is "open for colonisation," as well as the acceptance that it is permissible, and even prudent to do so, has influenced Greek historiography, nation building, and national politics since the recognition by Great Britain, France, and Russia of Greek autonomy with the London Protocol of 1830. It could be argued that this approach to history in the case of 'Greece' originated before that time, through the ideological conception of a new Greek state in the minds, notebooks, and salons of the Philhellenics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as a vision for the future of a particular part of the Ottoman empire.[4]

A key factor in understanding the use of pseudo-historical narratives in Greece is the impact of, and reactions to, the writings of the German historian Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, concerning the racial origins of the modern Greeks. In a series of publications in the 1830s, Fallmerayer stated that the "kin of the Hellenes" had been wiped out in Europe, and that the modern population of Greece had no biological connection to the populations of Greek antiquity, but in fact originated from Albanian and Slavic immigrant populations (Grigoriadis 2013: 25). Furthermore, he criticised the supporters of the Greek struggle for independence for having been "intoxicated" with their notions of Ancient Greece. The question of continuity had played a part in internal discussions in Greece since

3 Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at Rutgers University. Died 2009.

4 French fascination with Greece, and the impetus for connecting a particular area of the western Ottoman Empire with Greek Antiquity, is linked to the reception of a book published in 1788 by Jean-Jacques Barthélemy entitled *The Travels of Anacharsis the Younger in Greece*. In Germany the publication of *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) by F.A. Wolf, and the writings of W.V. Humboldt and J.J. Winckelmann reflected similar fascination, as did the graecophilia of Ludwig I of Bavaria (1786–1868), whereas the most famous figure in the British Philhellenic movement was the poet G.G. Byron, who was also directly involved in the Greek War of Independence.

before the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821, and Fallmerayer's statements underlined the need to construct a national narrative that could connect the Greek and Philhellenic claims of a cultural or even biological bloodline from the Greeks of antiquity to the population of the emerging modern Greek state.[5] A great effort to construct and cultivate the present by colonising the past came from Adamantios Korais, who although being an Orthodox Christian, was a humanist by education. Although Korais recognised the need for the Orthodox Church in the formation of a Greek state, he was critical of the power of the clergy and the Patriarchate, and advocated a liberal, multilateral religious policy and governance in the new Greece (Özkirimli and Sofos 2008: 78–87). For the same reasons, his construction of a national narrative had omitted the Byzantine Empire as well as Hellenism and the Roman period.

However, Fallmerayer's claims, as well as the obvious linguistic diversity in the population of 'new Greece', became a further argument for the need of a unifying narrative about the religious history of the Greek people, connecting modern Greeks with antiquity through the Byzantine period. The first to create such a narrative was Spyridon Zambelios, who compared the role of the "Roman Empire of Constantinople" as the "evident and necessary link which attached to the initial European civilisation the unspoiled relic of antiquity that was rescued in modern times", to the role of the New Testament as having "completed, illuminated and interpreted the Old Testament" (Grigoriadis 2013: 26). The writings of Zambelios were developed in a distinctly Hegelian, historicist direction by historian Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, who concocted what has been called the Hellenic-Christian Synthesis. In his writings, Orthodox Christianity occupies a central place as a marker of national identity, and the Byzantine period is viewed as the key element to the resurgence of Ancient Greece in the form of a modern Greek state. Beyond sheer historicism, there are clear elements of national mysticism in Paparrigopoulos' work, which describes the 'Greek Nation' as a conscious entity, undergoing transformations "according to the needs and circumstances of each historic mission" and having been reborn three times in the course of history (Grigoriadis 2013).

3 Ufology and the Cultic Milieu in Greece

In much the same manner that nationalism played a key role in the development of the Hellenic-Christian Synthesis version of Greek religious history,

5 Significant initiatives to legitimise the new state´s connections to Greek antiquity included moving the capitol from Nauplion to Athens, choosing the Goddess Athena as the emblem of the city, and the establishment of a university housed in a neoclassical building.

nationalist theories based on strategic uses of pseudo-history permeate the ufological theories found in contemporary Greece.[6] In addition, Greece plays a key role in what is often referred to internationally as one of the earliest historical accounts of a UFO sighting, namely the so-called Alexander incident. This myth, which is mentioned on a number of UFO websites, claims that Alexander the Great witnessed two large flying shields in Central Asia in 329 B.C.E. Historian Yannis Deliyannis proposes that a quote from Quintus Curtius, a classical authority on Alexander, could shed light on the origins of the Alexander narrative, referring to Curtius' description of the battle of Tyre in 332 B.C.E. where the Tyrians threw heated bronze shields full of sand and boiling excrement at Alexander's troops, forcing them to strip off their armour, thus rendering them vulnerable to attack. The Alexander narrative still attracts much attention in ufological circles, and as Deliyannis concludes: "One might find it amusing however that, in a limited sense, the aforementioned UFO writers have somewhat become the spiritual continuators of the tradition of the Alexander Romance into our century, still adding marvelous events to it, as had done before them their medieval predecessors" (Deliyannis 2009).[7] The widespread popularity of Erich von Däniken's books, particularly *The Odyssey of the Gods: The Alien History of Ancient Greece* (2002), has also had a massive impact on the development of heterodox UFO theories in Greece, and variations of the Ancient Astronaut Theory (AAT) appear as key elements in many strands of ufological conspiracy theory. Furthermore, an important factor responsible for the recurrence of AAT is the inherent malleability of von Däniken's work, which allows it to be fashioned to fit the needs of a wide variety of agendas and ideologies.

Although international UFO religions such as Scientology, the Aetherius Society, and the Raëlian Movement have some presence in contemporary Greece, they are only represented on a relatively small scale, and where such groups generally do not emphasise the importance of the Greek past, Greece's homegrown religiously oriented ufologies tend to allow Greek antiquity an important place in conspiracist mythologies and pseudo-historiographical accounts. There is to my knowledge only one example of an international UFO-oriented religion actively referring to Greek antiquity in its narratives and its public communication in a contemporary Greek context: in September 2008, calling for "a great return to the pre-Christian, beautiful values of

6 For a comprehensive list of Greek UFO-related websites, forums, resources, and blogs, I recommend Dimitris Hatzopoulos' website: http://www.hyper.net/ufo/forums.html Accessed 20/06/2017.

7 The narrative about the Alexander incident was first formulated in the 1959 book *Stranger than Science* by American writer Frank Edwards and later repeated by Alberto Fenoglio in 1966 in the Italian ufological periodical *Clypeus*. Neither of the two authors refer to original sources from any of the Alexander biographies.

the Greek gods" (Raelpress 2008), Raël (Claude Vorilhon), the founder of the Raëlian movement publicly supported a protest led by the Athenian Pagan group ELLIN.A.I.S against the construction of the new Acropolis Museum in Athens. However, the Raëlian support for the Greek protestors should be understood in the light of the movement's own theology. Raël furthermore stated that the "Greek deities were in fact the Elohim," a group of 'extraterrestrial scientists' understood by Raëlians as the "creators of all life on Earth, including humanity." Although organised UFO religions are not particularly well represented in Greece, more heterodox religious and esoteric UFO beliefs thrive in what sociologist Colin Campbell has termed the cultic milieu, which includes "all deviant belief systems and their associated practices" as well as the "collectivities, institutions, individuals, and media of communication associated with these beliefs" (Campbell 2002: 14).

Beyond the high degree of heterodox and deviant beliefs in the cultic milieu, and its complex and fluid composition of groups and individuals in a constant flux, Campbell emphasises the important role of a multitude of media, means, and strategies employed to disseminate and develop ideas and beliefs in a highly communicative environment, and underlines the centrality of undogmatic discourse about beliefs, and the malleability of topics and subject matter (Campbell 2002: 15).

The cultic milieu is a fluid phenomenon with a constant production and exchange of views and a flow of persons and interpersonal constellations. However, this does not necessarily imply a fundamentally egalitarian culture or a horizontal distribution of power. Hierarchies may be observed in both the elevated status of certain communicators, the authority of certain key publications or methods, and the popularity of select theories or beliefs (Hammer 2001: 36–41). But given the fluid nature of the cultic milieu, the speed with which power and authority is displaced and redistributed is notably higher than what may be observed in more narrowly defined religious movements, communities, and organisations. In light of the role of communicators, the variety of media, and the importance of key actors and influential publications, I provide a brief overview of such actors in the Greek context, outlining examples of their historical interaction and important publications, as well as the online reception of some of these beliefs.

4 The Epsilon Team

In October 2015, Greek police arrested members of a militant terrorist group, who called themselves the Epsilon Team. Five men were detained, for bombings

of the Bank of Greece in Kalamata and the statue of the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI Palaiologos in Mystras, as well as other planned attacks and possession of explosives and weapons (To Vima 2015).[8] The group was in possession of a large number of firearms and explosives as well as bows and swords. They used epsilonist symbols, which were also spray-painted on walls in the vicinity of the targets of their attacks, and had published a number of texts on their website, in which they presented their theories about the Zionist origins of Nazism (referred to as 'Zionazism'), as well as 'Zionazist' and Masonic conspiracies (Angelos 2015). The majority of the members of the group were natives of the Peloponnese peninsula, and their manifesto, which was critical of both the Byzantine and the Ottoman Empire, called for a liberation of the Peloponnese peninsula, with references to its alleged Pelasgian origins.[9] This militant separatist group is one of a small number of groups who have very recently appropriated the name Team Epsilon,[10] while the notion of an Epsilon Team has a longer history in Greece. But where does the idea of such a secret group originate from? Which forms has it assumed in the minds of its subscribers? Who are attracted to the idea, and why?

The widespread constellation of Greek conspiracy theories about the so-called Epsilon Team (*Epsilon Omada*) has a history of approximately four decades in radical right-wing circles and in the cultic milieu of Greece. It can be described as a variety of Hellenocentric mythology about a benevolent secret society with extraterrestrial origins (as well as superior knowledge and technology), that protects the Greek nation, and has a privileged relationship to

8 The choice of targeting the statue of Palaiologos is interesting, since he is also known in Greek folklore as the "Marble Emperor," and was said to someday awaken and free Greece and Constantinople from Ottoman rule. The location also warrants some speculation. Mystras is the birthplace of the Neoplatonic scholar Gemistos Plethon, who was an advocate of replacing Christianity with a "new" religion, which would resemble ancient Greek polytheism. He is also an important intellectual figure to many Hellenocentrics and Neopagans in contemporary Greece.

9 Claiming Pelasgian or antediluvian origins is a recurring feature in both Greek and Albanian conspiracy theory and pseudo-history, and a shared focal point of disputes concerning claims of ethnic, religious, and linguistic primordiality (Endresen 2012: 48–61, 91–92, 225–227). See also Endresen's chapter in the present volume.

10 Another example is the Omada "E" Hepsilon group also known as Club Hepsilon, which is led by former professional Marathon runner Aristotelis Kakogeorgiou. This Hellenocentric group also claims to be the real Epsilon Team, but although conspiracy theories seem to play an important role in the group's worldview, they apparently do not subscribe to the more prevalent eschatological and anti-Semitic narratives present in the earlier texts about the Epsilon Team. Kakogeorgiou, who has also recently financed the construction of a Neopagan temple near Thessaloniki, has stated in an interview, that the group is open to all races and religions (Lampiris 2015)

prominent historical figures from ancient Greece, most notably Aristotle and Alexander the Great. However, although epsilonist discourse often features one or more elements from this central narrative, it is constantly reshaped, to include a wide variety of sub-narratives, and functions as a prism for understanding national and international economic and political events. A series of devastating earthquakes are interpreted by some epsilonists as the product of the Epsilon Team's extraterrestrial technology, used strategically to coincide with Barack Obama's visit to Turkey, while the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s are viewed by others as a battle for a secret wave-gun developed by Nicola Tesla, who is also considered by some to be a high-ranking member of the Epsilon Team.[11] In this light, the Epsilon Team conspiracy theory could be described as what Barkun (2003) has called a "superconspiracy theory," which links multiple conspiracies together hierarchically, and combines the so-called "event" and "systemic" conspiracies. A key feature of Epsilon Team conspiracy theories is the use of millennialist discourse and eschatology, which are often fused with a variety of anti-Semitic, racist, esoteric, and ufological elements. As Robertson (2016) has argued, this type of combination of conspiracy theory and millennialist discourse is a "two way process" in which conspiracism has adopted millennialist perspectives and "some Christian groups have adopted conspiracist discourses." In a broader historical perspective, Robertson also argues that it "is part of a broader cross-fertilization between popular religious and conspiracist fields over the latter half of the twentieth century" (2016: 14–15). However, although epsilonist conspiracism displays traits that could be interpreted as inherently late-modern, and although it employs a wide variety of references to cutting-edge and imaginary technology, it should be understood in a longer diachronic perspective as well. As pointed out by Asprem and Dyrendal (2015) both the networks of information, and the format and content of narratives in the cultic milieu of the latter half of the twentieth century are comparable to nineteenth-century occultism. In contemporary epsilonist conspiracism, key elements of the narratives should also be understood in the light of much older esoteric traditions. The idea of ascended benevolent masters, such as the epsilonist view of Aristotle,[12] mirrors the Mahatmas of Theosophy, and there are even examples of spiritualist writings in contemporary Greece that to a large extent resemble epsilonist conspiracism. The construction and dissemination

11 "Poia einai i mystiki organosi epsilon (E)?" (Who are the secret organization epsilon (E))? www.angelfire.com. At http://www.angelfire.com/pro/delfoi/page8.htm. Accessed 23/06/2017.

12 In the case of epsilonism, Aristotle is actually a descended master, who has come to earth from the stars to help the Greeks.

of anti-Semitism in contemporary epsilonism also resembles similar trends in nineteenth-century esotericism (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015: 16–17).

The Epsilon Team is often described in online debates and on websites as a secret group of scientists, engineers, soldiers, and famous Greeks, and is (in some versions of the mythology) connected to a secret society called the "Unseen Beginning" (*Aoratos Archi*).[13] Other versions of the mythology place the origins of the Epsilon Team in Classical Antiquity or even earlier, while some claim that it was founded by the Greek shipping magnate and billionaire Aristotle Onassis. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the epsilonist mythology was propagated in books, articles, and TV-shows by a number of authors, the most influential of which are Ioannis Fourakis, Anestis S. Keramydas, Dimosthenis Liakopoulos, and Georgios Gkiolvas. Since the spread of the Internet, epsilonism has also become a widely discussed topic on a large number of Greek and international blogs, websites, and Internet discussion boards, and it has merged with a number of international conspiracy theories. Although a fringe phenomenon, epsilonism is quite well known in Greece,[14] particularly in the cultic milieu. It has had a notable impact on conspiracy theory and popular culture, and seems to be popular mainly in right-wing anti-Semite circles, as a fringe phenomenon in conservative Orthodox Christianity, and among the so-called anti-Romeic Hellenocentrics,[15] whereas the Epsilon mythology seems to be considered a ridiculous and marginal project by many of the Hellenic Neopagans I have encountered.[16]

There is a notable lack of scholarly research of Epsilon Team theories, which to the best of my knowledge, have only been discussed by Kalozoides (2012: 177–198), while Makrides briefly mentions the author Fourakis (Makrides 2009: 268).

13 A clandestine subgroup of the Greek revolutionary Society of Friends (*Filiki Etairia*), which played a key role in the Greek War of Independence.

14 Although there are no statistical data to provide a quantitative perspective on the phenomenon, its popularity is indicated by a high number of publications and videos as well as a myriad of websites and blogs discussing the Epsilon Team.

15 A term used by Makrides (2009) to distinguish between Neopagans and other groups and individuals who are critical of Christianity and work for a return to Greece's pre-Christian religion and culture. As noted by Makrides, although a significant number of anti-Romeic Hellenocentrics are opposed to the Greek Orthodox Church, there are some, most notably represented by the group behind the magazine *Daulos*, who aim at bringing (ethnically Greek) Christianity and spiritual Hellenicity together. The *Daulos* group's position is implicitly anti-Semitic and they have suggested to the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece that the Old Testament be expunged from the Orthodox canon (Makrides 2009: 269).

16 Although some Neopagans subscribe to parts of the Epsilon mythology, there seems to be somewhat higher subscription in some Greek Neopagan circles to more or less explicitly anti-Semitic variations of the so-called Khazar hypothesis of Ashkenazi ancestry.

Furthermore, many of the books containing epsilonist theories are out of print, which poses a considerable challenge to studying the phenomenon. For the same reasons, the following discussion of the history and content of the conspiracy theories about the Epsilon Team may appear somewhat fragmented, and is not an exhaustive survey of the phenomenon. Rather, it aims to introduce some of the key persons and publications, in a chronological order. Any attempt to present the content or social context of the epsilonist theories as homogenous would miss the point, since a trademark feature of much of the material is its heterodox nature. Nevertheless, I have attempted to outline some of the recurring themes and plot devices as they appear both in the authoritative versions of the principal writers of epsilonist conspiracy theory, and in their reception and development on the Internet. The following study of epsilonist conspiracy theories is based on the work of Kalozoides, as well as on a combination of sources, including books, newspaper articles, interviews, and material from public websites, blogs, YouTube channels, and online discussion boards.

4.1 *Historical Background*

The name of the Epsilon Team is inspired by the fifth letter of the Greek alphabet.[17] In the modern context, the letter 'epsilon' has been used as a symbol of freedom (*eleutheria*) and Greece (*Ellada*), and played a significant role in the revolutionary narratives of the Greek War of Independence. In order to understand the popularity of the Epsilon Team theories, one must look at the social and political context at the time of its conception, and in particular at the strategies of conceptualising the Greek state as ethnically, culturally, and religiously homogenous and continuous, and the mechanisms of exclusion and expulsion of elements considered foreign. Just as it had done at the birth of the modern Greek state, Greek Antiquity played a significant role during the 4th August regime (1936–1941) of Ioannis Metaxas. A key element of his conceptualisation of modern Greece as the "Third Hellenic Civilization" was that there had been racial continuity since Antiquity. Following the occupation of Greece during the Second World War, and during the junta period, a massive anti-Communist mobilisation took place. 'National-mindedness' (*ethnikofrosyni*) became a strategic term, which referred to classical Antiquity and was used to separate 'true Greeks' from left-wing dissidents, who were also referred to as *miasma*, the ancient Greek term for pollution (Kazamias 2014). In conclusion, the disciplinarian regimes of the twentieth century celebrated

17 This letter has been used in a number ways in ancient and modern Greek history, as a symbol of a variety of concepts. The most notable discussion of the topic in ancient sources is by Plutarch.

Greek antiquity, and both the post-Second World War civil war and the junta regime were prone to conspiracism, albeit towards communists and left-wing intellectuals, rather than towards an imagined Jewish world conspiracy.[18] However, the development of Epsilon mythology in the direct aftermath of the junta may well have been fertilised by the paranoia and exclusion-mania of the 'national-mindedness' policy, while its anti-Semitic elements could be seen as an influence from Orthodox Christian radicals.

Although a number of fascist groups from the 1930s to 1960s took their name from the letter epsilon (Kalozoides 2012: 183), the early origins of the current Epsilon Team mythology can be traced to the 1977 publication of *Spaceship Epsilon: Aristotle's Organon: The Researcher* by George Lefkofrydis.[19] The author described how he had deciphered the corpus of texts by Aristotle known as the *Organon*,[20] how he had located hidden secrets in them, and how Aristotle was an extraterrestrial from the star Mu in the constellation Lagos. Lefkofrydis had originally been inspired by reading Plutarch's text *On the E at Delphi* in the early 1960's,[21] and during the next two decades he developed a theory about the Epsilon Team as a secret society of influential Greeks, who protected the interests of the Greek people. This idea was expanded further with the mention of a subdivision of the Epsilon Team called the Katraki Group, which allegedly consisted of natural scientists and nuclear physicists, who worked to build superior technology to serve the Epsilon Team. However, Lefkofrydis' book was withdrawn quickly after its publication (Kalozoides 2012: 186).

The ideas of Lefkofrydis were picked up by Ioannis Fourakis,[22] an Athenian journalist of Cretan origins, initially in the 1989 book *Minymata ton Delfon* (*Messages of Delphi*), followed by two interviews in the magazine *Trito Mati* (*Third Eye*).[23] Fourakis built on Lefkofrydis' idea about the esoteric content of Aristotle's *Organon*, claiming that a correct reading of the text could grant immense power, and that Fourakis himself had participated in secret meetings

18 Although anti-Semitic conspiracism did not determine the junta's policy, it must be assumed that it still persisted in the Orthodox Church.

19 This is my attempt at an English translation of the cryptic and linguistically challenging Greek title *Kosmoskafos sta-gyro Epsilon, To Organon Organo tou Aristoteli: O Erevnitis*.

20 *Organon* is the name given by the Peripatetics to the six-volume standard collection of the writings of Aristotle on logic. Their titles and Bekker number are: 1a *Categories*, 16a *On Interpretation*, 24a *Prior Analytics*, 71a *Posterior Analytics*, 100a *Topics*, 164a *Sophistical Refutations*.

21 An essay from Plutarch's *Moralia*.

22 "Poia (ypotithetai oti) einai i Omada Epsilon?" (Who are the [alleged] Epsilon Team?). www.lifo.gr. At http://www.lifo.gr/articles/mikropragmata/79162. Accessed 21/06/2017.

23 Vol. 36 in June of 1994 and vol. 61 in April of 1997.

with NASA and US officials, who had spent millions of dollars trying to extract the secret knowledge from the texts. Fourakis had already published a large number of rampantly anti-Semitic books since his debut in 1977 with *Sionistikes Synomosies* (*Zionst Conspiracies*).[24] Although a large part of Fourakis' publications do not deal directly with epsilonism, and have a predominantly anti-Semitic focus, he is considered by many to be the one who first coined the term Epsilon Team (Kalozoides 2012: 185). Fourakis presented a narrative about an ancient cosmic war between the Hellenes, who were descendants of the Olympic gods, and the Jews, who originated from the bowels of the earth, and stated that this conflict had begun with the Gigantomachy (Kalozoides 2012: 185). Fourakis predicts a revival of Hellenic culture and religion, but although he sees contemporary Greek Neopaganism as a symptom of such a development, he sees Orthodox Christianity as a potential partner in the new Hellenization of Greece (Makrides 2009: 268).

It seems that one reason why Fourakis has become much more well known than Lefkofrydis as the originator of epsilonism, is the great popularity of his anti-Semitic literature, which made it possible for him to reach a much wider public than Lefkofrydis.[25] Through his popularity as an author of anti-Semitic books, and by appealing to a wider anti-Semitic audience of conservative and radical Orthodox Christians, Fourakis has appealed to the broader masses and seems to have managed to make himself and his mythological synthesis of epsilonism, anti-Semitism, and Christian eschatology widely popular rather than marginal since as early as the late 1970s.

In 1996, Anestis S. Keramydas, who had been inspired by the programmatic book by Lefkofrydis (Kalozoides 2012: 186) published the bestseller *Team E* (*Omada E*). Keramydas,[26] a former merchant navy officer from Thessaloniki who claimed that he himself was a member of the Epsilon Team, also

24 *Zionist Conspiracies* was so popular that it was republished eleven times in the next two decades (Kalozoides 2012: 185).

25 Fourakis also developed a Greek version of the Indigo Children hypothesis, claiming that the so called 'April Children' born in April 1983 had special marks on their skin, and would play an important role in the future. This hypothesis seems to be an inversion of an Orthodox eschatological tendency of the same year, developed by the priest Father Maximos, who predicted that the Antichrist would be born in April 1983.

26 Keramydas has previously appeared in short TV infomercials on a variety of small Greek TV stations and currently hosts the program *The Day Will Come* (from the ancient Greek: *Esetai Imar*) on the channel OPION. He has recently added an Orthodox Christian angle to his epsilonist theories, claiming on his show, that Jesus was actually the Ancient Greek hero Jason, and presenting Orthodox Christianity as a direct continuation of Ancient Greek religion. In 2004, he joined the nationalist, Christian-conservative party LA.O.S and has recently aspired to a political career.

emphasised a racist and anti-Semitic angle on the Epsilon Team, claiming that not only the Greeks, but also the Jews, were originally from outer space. According to Keramydas, who developed the idea of the Hellenes as descendants of the Greek gods, modern Greeks possess superior DNA because the ancient Greeks were the descendants of a divine alien race. Furthermore, he claimed that these extraterrestrial ancestors of the Greeks were to visit Greece in 2012 to combat a Zionist conspiracy, and bring about Greek world domination and lasting global peace through the spread of ancient Greek culture.[27]

Another important propagator of epsilonism is the TV personality and author Demosthenis Liakopoulos. His version of epsilonism is eclectic and includes a variety of international conspiracy theories and variations on ufological themes. Like Keramydas, Liakopoulos has added an Orthodox Christian angle to his epsilonist theories, involving apocalyptic and messianic aspects, linking his insights to prophecies he claims he has gained from the monastic communities on Mount Athos in Northern Greece. Liakopoulos has published a series of books containing apocalyptic visions mediated through a number of Greek and Cypriot clerics, including the famous healer, Father Paisios from Mount Athos.

A number of Greek authors and TV personalities have also discussed the development of secret military technology by the Epsilon Team. A key figure in these technological conspiracy theories is George Gkiolvas, a physicist and inventor who claims to have worked for NASA, developing a number of secret weapons including a sound cannon and special anti-aircraft technology.[28] Gkiolvas' claims about working for NASA were apparently refuted by the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in 2010 after they had been contacted by a sceptical Greek blogger.[29] Gkiolvas' real claim to fame is the invention of the so-called Bevatron, which according to epsilonist mythology is a secret weapon, sometimes referred to as the Greek 'Golem' against the Jews. Gkiolvas has taken the name Bevatron from a piece of real technology (Goldhaber 1992), a particle accelerator (weak-focusing proton synchrotron) that was constructed in 1954 at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and decommissioned in 2009 (Lofgren 2005).

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27 Keramydas has also claimed that the Temple of Apollo at Delphi is an interstellar spacecraft.

28 Gkiolvas also knew Lefkofrydis, since Lefkofrydis had at one point been Gkiolvas' lawyer (Kalozoides 2012: 186).

29 This information was found in a wikitalk about Gkiolvas and the Bevatron. Screenshots of what appears to be an authentic correspondence exist and at the time of writing, the files were available on the following urls: https://tinyurl.com/yb368gxn and https://tinyurl.com/y9cs8ceg. Accessed 24/06/2017.

4.2 *Pelasgians, Pyramids, and Hyperdiffusionism*

A recurring theme in epsilonism, and in a large part of Greek nationalist religious narratives in general, is the claim that the ancient Greeks, or in some accounts the Pelasgians (referred to as antediluvian proto-Greeks) were responsible for spreading Greek culture, DNA, and language to the far corners of the globe. This promethean influence, which in Greek pseudo-historical narratives is tied to such diverse subjects as the building of the pyramids, the languages of the Americas, and even the origins of the Ainu of Japan, is a phenomenon commonly referred to by scholars as hyperdiffusionism. The late Garret G. Fagan, Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies at Penn State University, describes hyperdiffusionism as

> part of the furniture in most pseudoarchaeological scenarios. It is particularly prominent in those promoted by nationalist programs, since the favoured nation can be presented as the crucible of regional high achievement, or worse, global civilization. The supposition here is that only one nation or people originated great things, which then diffused to the less creative populations.
>
> FAGAN 2006: 363

In the Greek context, one theme in particular has been at the centre of hyperdiffusionist theories in the past decades; the origins of the pyramids. This feature originated in particular historical events, and initially only included the pyramids of Egypt and a few pyramidal structures in Greece, but in recent years it has been expanded to include claims that antediluvian Greek explorers (or Alexander the Great, in some variations) built or influenced the building of all pyramidal structures on the planet. The origin of Greek claims to the pyramids must be understood in the light of a particular series of events in the field of Classical studies, namely the publication of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987), and its impact on contemporary Greek claims to the origins of Ancient Greek culture and civilisation (Lefkowitz 2006).

In what has been referred to as an Afrocentric theory of ancient Greek origins, Bernal launched a critique of Classical Studies, arguing that the influence of Egypt and the Near East on the development of ancient Greek culture had been toned down by scholars driven by either ignorance or bigotry.[30] While mostly ignoring the Near Eastern influence himself, he mainly focused on the

30 For a thorough discussion of esotericism and Afrocentric theories in a North-American context, including the impact of Bernal's work, see Gregorius (2013).

role of Egypt, claiming that key elements such as scientific and philosophical accomplishments of the Greeks were in fact stolen from the Egyptians (Lefkowitz in Fagan 2006: 179–202). A further claim by Bernal was that the Egyptians had invaded Greece in the third millennium B.C.E., which he sought to prove by identifying selected archaeological remains in Greece as pyramids.[31]

In much the same way that Fallmerayer's theory of the racial origins of the modern Greeks set in motion a series of apologetic narratives, there have been recent Greek reactions to Bernal's work. In a struggle to refute Bernal´s work, a number of Greek writers published a series of pseudo-archaeological articles in the early 1990s in the journal *Davlos*, which in essence inverted Bernal's theory, claiming that the pyramid-like structures in Greece were in fact evidence that pyramid-building had originated in Greece and spread from there to Egypt. Although such claims have been thoroughly debunked (Lazos 1995), this hyperdiffusionist argument still persists in the Greek cultic milieu, and is found in in a variety of interpretations, some adjusted to epsilonist theories. A quote from a Web forum user discussing epsilonism may serve to illustrate one version of the hyperdiffusionist perspective:

> The pyramids are greek—pelasgian—not turkish or Chinese. remember : YUNAN province in China, what does this say to you? be honest? these are proto greek / pelasgian civilizations... call them olympians, titans.. it is the same period of man that saw the pyramids in egypt ... that even today with modern technology we are not able to replicate.[32]

This version of the narrative includes the antediluvians as well as a dubious etymological claim about the Aryan origins of the Ainu people. However, it deviates from a key element of epsilonism, inasmuch as the user is critical towards the extraterrestrial origins of the ancients:

> In Japan there is the White Race of Ainu (obviously from the Ionians), race Mediterranean origin, a remnant of the ancient Greek colonists. ...

31 A less known international Afrocentric conspiracy theory, which was centred around prehistoric Greece, was proposed by the Nation of Islam. According to this theory, a man named Yakub and his followers moved from Mecca to the Greek island of Patmos (Pelan) in the fifth millennium B.C.E, and set up a breeding programme with the purpose of creating a superior white race, through the systematic killing of black babies (Clegg III 1997: 49; Fritze 2009: 152–153: Gardell 1996: 110–111)

32 Quote from the debate "Greek (pelasgian) pyramids in China (5000bc greeks in china)," *Greece & Turkey Defence Forum*. At https://tinyurl.com/y8vogpz9. Accessed 20/06/2016.

> Therefore those who built the Chinese pyramids are not some alien beings, but antediluvian Greeks (Pelasgians).
>
> ROMULUS 007: 2013

Pyramid-oriented hyperdiffusionism is also found blended with racist and anti-Semitic theories of an eschatological nature, describing a final battle between the Olympians and the Nephilim, alternately described as the Christian God and Lucifer respectively (in a version accommodated to epsilonism), or at times as the Greeks and the Jews. Comments in a Web forum discussion from 2008 started by a user who was critical of epsilonism, may serve to illustrate how epsilonists blend eschatology (in this case in a version inspired by 2012 eschatology) with extraterrestrials, pyramids, Atlantis mythology, and mystical racial theories about the so-called ichor-gene:[33]

> ΕΨΙΛΟΝ (Epsilon) is real. 2011+ is when the Olympians will come down to Gea (Earth) and wake up Hellenes (Greeks) and to turn on the Ichor gene in our holy DNA. 2012+ is when the war will start between Olympians also known as ΕΛ(EL) and the Nefelim (Kronians-Followers of Kronus) we will win as we have done so before (10.000- war between Atlantians and Athenians. Also, many many years ago on planet Ares (Mars), that why the pyramid is destroyed on the upper-right side.) Also, just so you know, the Kronians live under the Earth. In 3000- Dionysus and Hercules was sent to missions. Dionysus went East to India and China and through the Kronians behind the Tartara gates and built pyramids on the top (China). Hercules went to New-Atlantis (America) and fought them, their he met with other Hellenes (the Anastazi- So called "white" Indians, with technology similar to Mycenean).[34]

The inclusion of Atlantis mythology in epsilonism may be related to the nationalist archaeology favoured by the Greek military junta (1967–1974). In particular, the theories of Spyridon Marinatos, who excavated the Akrotiri

33 A reference to the golden substance that Homer describes as the blood of the Greek gods (*Iliad* V. 364–382). In versions of epsilonism, this holy blood has been passed down to modern Greeks and elevates them above the rest of the world's population.

34 This quote is taken from a line of comments under the heading "epsilonism" on a discussion blog about subjects related to 2012 eschatology. In this quote, as well as all others from web discussion boards, the spelling is kept as it appears online despite peculiarities in spelling and orthography. The quote was found at: http://theyear2012.blogspot.se/2005/04/epsilonism.html. Accessed 10/07/2016.

site on the island of Santorini.[35] Marinatos was Director-General of Antiquities for the Greek Ministry of Culture during the military junta period, and had close ties to many of the colonels of the junta, including Georgios Papadopoulos.[36]

There is a wide variety of online narratives about the role of the special divine DNA of the Greeks and its role in the final battle against evil. The basic anthropological narrative found in epsilonism states that the Hellenes or 'true Greeks' are the only real humans,[37] the majority of the rest of mankind are lowly beings, whereas the Jews (and in some cases other groups such as the Chinese) are referred in de-humanising terms as 'zombies', 'draconians', 'methane-born', and 'genderless' (Kalozoides 2012: 183). The divine DNA of the 'true Greeks' is also used as an argument for racial hygiene, claiming that this is not a racist measure, but a key element in a war that has been going on since the Gigantomachy or in some cases, since a war was waged between the ancient Greeks and the Atlanteans:

> Hellenic civilization has existed 30.000 to 40.000 years ago. Our DNA is different to many other races. At that time the Hellenic civilization was involved in a war with Atlantis which actually did exist. We are in a war to this very day with the rest of "humanity." Not about money or even power but over our DNA. it is the reason why many Helllenes REFUSE to marry outside of our DNA clan and our race. It isn't just a cultural attitude but it strikes a lot deeper. ALL of you know you are different. MANY of you are NOT rich and many of you are NOT educated. BUT. All of you understand that you are special. Of course you are. It is the reason why we have endured such hardships over thousands of years. Our enemies are all about eliminating us.
>
> RUSSEL 2008

The idea that 'true Greekness' is under attack in a cosmic battle, in which the main thing at stake is not culture but DNA, underlines the inherent combination of an underdog mentality and a wish for empowerment, which seems to be a central feature of epsilonist conspiracy theory. At the same time, a

35 Although Marinatos himself did not advocated the identification of Santorini as the Atlantis mentioned by Plato in *Timaeus* and *Critias*, his associate, the American James W. Mavor was more confident about this identification (Ellis 1999: 84).

36 However, Marinatos lost his position when Papadopoulos' successor Dimitris Ioannidis came to power in 1973.

37 A claim which is sometimes combined with arguments about a higher average height among Greeks due to this special DNA.

connection seems to be made between DNA and culture, inasmuch as it is the divine DNA which functions as a proof of belonging to the 'true Greek' culture, while simply claiming the culture does not provide the divine DNA. This is not unlike the apologetic reactions to the Fallmerayer hypothesis, which also sought to establish adamantine argument for the continuity of 'Greekness'. However, while the genetic argument was also employed in reaction to Fallmerayer's writings, culture and religion became equally strong or even stronger arguments. But where the reactions to Fallmerayer were posed by intellectuals, much of the epsilonist racial theories are produced and consumed by less intellectual circles. Furthermore, the fact that epsilonism originally developed in a social context that was critical of Christianity, and still has some supporters in Neopagan circles, defuses a key component of the 'Hellenic-Christian Synthesis' as a reaction to Fallmerayer's hypothesis, namely the role of the Byzantine period as a missing link between Greek antiquity and modern Greece. Instead, the bloodline argument is emphasised, and backed by the notion of a cosmic battle and the dehumanisation and demonisation of the perceived enemy.

As mentioned previously, epsilonist conspiracy theories should be understood in the disciplinarian political contexts in which they originated. Similarly, there is no doubt that the popularity of epsilonist conspiracy theories is affected by socio-economic factors, and the two major crises of the past decade: the Greek economic collapse, and the more recent refugee crisis are both likely to have contributed to the popularity and development of the Epsilon Team mythology. The central theme of a Jewish conspiracy for world domination seems to play well into more generally accepted conspiracy theories in Greece, concerning conspiracies between politicians and bankers to take control of Greece, Europe, or even the world. A similar recent innovation in the Epsilon world view is the expansion of the image of the enemy of the Greeks, from only the Jews, to include other migrants, who are more easily identifiable. While Syrian refugees do not figure as active players in the epsilonist conception of the war for world domination, but are rather seen as a ploy by either Israel, the USA, or Angela Merkel to destabilise Greece, the Chinese migrants in Greece have recently been included as a new fifth column ethnicity. One reason for this may be that, while Greek Jews do not generally stick out, the Chinese are easily identified, and furthermore, have been quite industrious in Greece in the past decade, which might well be a thorn in the eye of disenfranchised Greek nationalists with epsilonist leanings. However, despite the introduction of this new enemy of the Epsilon Team, the Jews are still considered the arch-enemy of the Greeks, and are in many cases seen as the ones who control the Chinese.

4.3 *Eschatology, Demonology, and Anti-Semitism*

As previously mentioned, anti-Semitism is widespread in Greek society, and is frequently paired with an interest in conspiracy theories. This is not a new phenomenon, but may be traced as far back as the formation of the modern Greek state. The vast majority of the Greek population are Orthodox Christians, and Orthodox Christianity has been a fundamental marker of national identity since emancipation from Ottoman rule. The reason for this role of religion is in fact a consequence of Ottoman bureaucracy, which established the so-called *millet* system, composed of three *millets* or communities: the Armenian, the Greek, and the Jewish.[38] The millets were an administrative tool for population management, and were based on religion rather than language, which meant that even Serb, Bulgarian, and Romanian Orthodox Christians were part of the Greek millet, whereas Greek-speaking Jews were considered Jews rather than Greeks (Özkirimli and Sofos 2008: 44–46). This division led to theories about a Jewish conspiracy in the early years of the modern Greek state. The earliest historical case of such conspiracy theories was in 1891 in the 'Blood Libel' case against the Jewish population of Corfu, Lefkada, and Zakynthos, in which the Jews were blamed for the murder of a girl who, although at first referred to as Christian, later proved to be Jewish (Beaton and Ricks 2009: 103). The modern origins of European anti-Semitism have been subject of much debate.[39] Some scholars, such as Hannah Arendt, have held that it is an exclusively modern phenomenon, while others have suggested that it may be traced to receptions of Graeco-Roman antiquity, such as the case of Friedrich Nietzsche's use of the writings of Tacitus on the Jews in his *Histories* (Cancik and Cancik-Lindemaier 2004). However, irrespective of the earlier origins of this phenomenon, the more immediate origins of anti-Semitism in Greece should be understood in relation to the distribution of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, particularly by members of the Orthodox clergy (Perdurant 1995).

In light of the history of Orthodox Christianity as a marker of Greek national identity and the role of the Church in the propagation of anti-Semitic ideology, I propose that the anti-Semitism present in epsilonism should be understood as part of the wider Greek and European history of anti-Semitic demonisation. The fundamental point of epsilonism is the identification of true 'Greekness' through narratives about being a chosen people with superior DNA and links to Greek Antiquity. Although epsilonist pseudo-history diverges from Orthodox

38 The millet system was established by Mehmet II in the middle of the fifteenth century (Özkirimli and Sofos 2008: 44).

39 For a discussion of the historical origins of anti-Semitism, and its possible roots in Antiquity, see Gager (1983).

Christian anti-Semitism in its references to a polytheistic rather than a monotheistic past, the basic narrative structure of these two types of anti-Semitic ideology is similar, and considering that epsilonism has not developed in a cultural vacuum, but rather that it is a product of Greek social and cultural trends, epsilonist demonisation of Jews can be interpreted as a variation on a theme based on texts such as the *Protocols*, and established and propagated by representatives of the Orthodox Christian majority.

Considering that epsilonist anti-Semitism inscribes the antagonistic relationship between 'true Greeks' and Jews in a narrative about the ancient extraterrestrial origins of these groups, I propose that Christopher Partridge's analysis of the Christian origins of alien demonology may shed further light on the construction of the Jews as an alien demonic enemy in the epsilonist worldview (Partridge 2004). It may also be able to explain the selection of figures from Greek Antiquity, such as Aristotle, who are described as ascended spiritual guides and guardians. Partridge emphasises the significance of the Theosophical tradition in the history of UFO religion, which he argues is connected to Theosophical ideas about "other worlds and extraterrestrial civilizations." He also sees a connection between notions of the extraterrestrial in UFO spirituality and ideas about ascended masters in Theosophy (2004: 164–165). The foundational epsilonist myth presented by Lefkofrydis in 1977, in which Aristotle is a benevolent astral being who looks out for the interests of mankind ('true Greeks'), may be understood as a local development of the Theosophical ascended master. This idea about aliens as "highly spiritually evolved, morally superior, technologically advanced, benevolent beings," which originates in the early conceptualisation of aliens first formulated in the 1950s, may be understood as a product of the combination of technological advances and religious decline (164). However, in a more recent development, which Partridge notes is present in both religious and conspiratorial discourse, the alien typology has shifted to demonological conceptualisations about aliens as malevolent beings. He argues that the plausibility of malevolent aliens is based on the familiarity of similar figures in Christianity (173) and that "while much of UFO religion has its roots in Theosophical thought, its demonology is firmly rooted in the Christian tradition" (185).

The highly dualistic eschatology present in epsilonism supports the hypothesis that epsilonist anti-Semitism is inspired by a combination of Christian demonology and the anti-Semitic legacy of the *Protocols*, in a version permeated by Orthodox Christian ideas. Where the anti-Semitism of the classical period constructed the Jews as a negative counterpart to Greek religious culture, the establishment of a binary worldview in which Judaism is the cosmological evil counterpart to a 'true' religion is a distinctly Christian narrative. As Partridge

notes, a similar dualistic tendency is found in the more recent development of alien-oriented mythologies (Partridge 2004: 174). In many respects this is also the case in the eschatology of epsilonism, where Jews or Zionism is seen as the chief enemy of 'true Greeks'. Whereas the benevolent aliens originate in Antiquity, and the contemporary defenders of humankind are a clandestine group with access to secret lore and superior technology that has been handed down from the original generation of defenders.

A key element of epsilonist eschatology is the relocation of the cosmic battle between Jews and Greeks from a celestial context to one of geopolitics. Partridge points out that a recurring feature of dualistic alien eschatology is that "the spiritual hosts and hordes become physical entities battling it out in the celestial sphere," which he sees as an inversion of Jewish apocalyptic thought which "provided a spiritual interpretation of the clash of warring forces in the earthly, political sphere" (Partridge 2004: 174). The primary location of the battle between good and evil in epsilonism is earth, both in its ideas about Greek antiquity and in its perspectives on the present. The Jewish or Zionist enemy is constructed as the driving force behind a conspiracy that seeks to influence politics, economics, and world stability, in some strands of this eschatology by proxy, using Chinese immigrants as their agents and in others through the establishment of political ideologies such as Socialism and Communism. However, despite the variety of conspiracy theories, a common feature is that the final battle for world domination and stability is being waged on earth. Following the observations of Partridge, this divergence from classical alien eschatology, would indicate that the geopolitical focus of the dualistic and anti-Semitic eschatology of the epsilonists is to some degree indebted to ideas about an earthly, rather than a celestially oriented, eschatology found in Jewish apocalyptic thought.

4.4 *The Epsilon Team and National Mythology*

As outlined above, there is reason to view epsilonist anti-Semitism and eschatology as being deeply rooted in Christian demonology and Jewish apocalyticism. Presently, I propose that the origins of the idea of the benevolent Epsilon Team should also be found in Christianity. Specifically, that it is inspired by a previous Orthodox conspiracy theory, which was institutionalised and functioned as one of the key myths in the establishment of modern Greek national identity after the Greek War of Independence: the myth of the Secret Schools (*Kryfa Scholeia*). The myth of the Secret Schools is a highly institutionalised narrative about the role of Orthodox clerics in protecting 'Greek' Christian culture during Ottoman rule, by teaching the children of the oppressed Greeks to read and write, and by providing rudimentary theological

education. Popularised through paintings and poetry, and institutionalised through annual ritualised performances in Greek schools where the children dramatise the story on the Greek national day, this myth is by far the most widespread national narrative about a secret society in Greece. The origins of the Secret Schools myth may be traced to the last two decades of the nineteenth century, specifically to a painting entitled *The Secret School* (1885–1886) by Nikolaos Gyzis, a poem with the same title by Ioannis Polemis (1900), and through the introduction of the myth into an already existing popular nursery rhyme. However, historical mention of the Secret Schools can only be traced to after the Greek War of Independence, whereas there is no mention of any such group during Ottoman rule. As a number of Greek scholars have pointed out, the first mention of the Secret Schools are found in the book *Leucothea* (1825) by German scholar Carl Iken, apparently based on his conversations with the Greek intellectual and revolutionary political ideologue Stephanos Kanellos (Alkis 1997; Danos 2002). As pointed out by Greek art historian Antonis Danos, Kanellos was a part of a group of intellectuals around Adamantios Korais, who "engaged in a process of reinventing the Greek people's past in order to determine their future" with the purpose of liberating Greece from Ottoman rule (Danos 2002). Analysing the reception of this piece of pseudo-history, Danos notes:

> Despite a lack of any serious historiographical support for the existence of such schools, this myth has long been part of the populist historical narrative and is sufficiently acknowledged in official discourse to warrant its incorporation into primary school textbooks.
>
> DANOS 2002

Although the myth of the Secret Schools has been debunked by several Greek scholars in recent years, it persists as one of the most central narratives in Greek society about a continuity of Greek culture from Byzantium to the modern Greek state. It is a narrative known by every single Greek and it is awarded legitimacy by the educational system, the Church, and the Greek state authorities. Despite the fact that there is no mention of the Secret Schools in epsilonism, since epsilonist narratives generally favour Greek Antiquity over the Byzantine, the idea of the Epsilon Team offers a clear analogy to the national myth of the Secret Schools, and the wide popularity of epsilonism could be explained to some extent by the public acceptance and official sanction of the Secret Schools as a historical truth.

Both narratives deal with a secret group that distributes ancient knowledge and agency with the soteriological purpose of liberating Greeks from foreign

threat or oppression, by connecting them with an old Greek legacy. The Secret Schools consist of a team of priests and the 'technology' of literacy and knowledge of Christian texts, which may be used to combat the Ottoman Empire, whereas epsilonism has replaced priests with Ancient Greek philosophers and gods who direct a secret team. Literacy and correct exegesis of a textual corpus (which is deemed to represent Greek culture) is constructed as a highly empowering technology in the Secret Schools myth, whereas the technology described by epsilonism reflects a modern age and now includes space crafts, sonic weapons, and the mysterious Bevatron. Similarly, the enemy found in epsilonism is not the external, oppressive majority of the Ottoman Empire, but the invisible, infiltrating enemy of Zionism or Jews in general.

4.5 *Epsilonism as Imagined Community*

Although differing in details, and representing national majority narratives and minority fringe beliefs respectively, epsilonism and the Secret Schools myth basically tell the same story: there is a Greek cultural, linguistic, and ethnic continuity from Byzantine (or earlier) times to the modern Greek state, which has been protected against a cultural, linguistic, and ethnic other, by a secret group representing 'true Greekness'. These two mythologies are apologetic narratives that react to Fallmereyer's claims of a break of continuity in Greek culture and ethnicity. Both mythologies could be understood as elements of the construction of Greek society or 'Greekness' as what Benedict Anderson has called an "imagined community" (1991: 5–7).

Although Anderson's conceptualisation aimed principally at describing the formation of majority discourses in state-oriented nationalism, it is equally relevant when looking at minority discourses about other communities, especially when claims of historical continuity and transcendence based on shared ethnic, religious, or linguistic origins are involved. Although the specific historical claims of the origins of a community of 'true Greeks' described in epsilonism diverges from the majority discourse of the Greek state by including aliens, spacecrafts, and anti-Semitic dualist eschatology, its fundamental characteristics are similar: it describes a horizontal community of Greeks united by a divine bloodline from ancient Greece and in some cases referred to as the only real humans; this community is limited through its special DNA and its opposition to a cosmological enemy, and it is perceived as sovereign and elevated over the rest of the earth's population and destined to eventually win the battle against the Jews for dominance.

Beyond the specificity of individual heterodox beliefs and claims that flourish in, and on the fringes of, epsilonist mythology, which describe Aristotle as a benevolent 'starman' waiting in the sky, encoding esoteric and technological

knowledge into his logical treatises, there is one central element in the epsilonist narratives that functions as a unifying factor: the idea that a secret group of entities, be they human, divine, or extraterrestrial, keep watch over the Greek people and protect them from evil and 'darkness'. This group, an imagined community in the literal sense (a community of the imagination), seems to reflect a shared hopeful worldview in those people who subscribe to the idea of an Epsilon Team, which could be understood as a reflection of a larger nationalist narrative about Greece as a transcendent historical community. In this sense, if we extend Anderson's classic definition of an imagined community, epsilonism may be interpreted as being composed of an imagined minority community—the epsilonist milieu—which is held together by the very act of imagining another community—the Epsilon Team—which in turn is imagined to uphold and protect the idea of the greater community of 'true Greeks'. In the curious case of the militant group calling themselves the Epsilon Team, elements of two of these communities—the idea of the Epsilon Team, and members of the epsilonist community—have merged together, in the establishment of an actual group based on the imaginary group, within an imagined community, connected by the shared image of the mythical Epsilon Team. Curiously, the militant epsilonists have chosen to wage war on a selection of national symbols, in what may have been seen as an attempt to redefine majority narratives about Greek society as a community.

5 Conclusion

As outlined by the editors' introduction to this volume, the relation between conspiracy theories and religion may be understood in three ways: conspiracy theory in, as, and about religion. The case of epsilonism is no exception. Rather, this specific strand of conspiracy theory displays elements of all three relational types. Epsilonism exists in religion, in the sense that it is propagated and developed within the esoteric, Hellenocentric, and fringe Christian milieus of Greek society. The central role of messianism, eschatology, and soteriology indicates that it could also be interpreted *as* religion, while the wide use of references to ancient Greek religion, Judaism, and Christianity as key elements in the construction of narratives about ascended beings and secret groups, shows that discourses *about* religion form the core of its construction of conspiracy theories. As I have shown, the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of epsilonism are highly dualistic, consisting of a secret Jewish or Zionist organisation (which in effect often includes all Jews), and a benevolent secret society, the Epsilon Team, which looks after the interests of 'true Greeks' by providing divine DNA,

esoteric teachings, and superior technology, and by championing the battle for the domination of the universe. Epsilonist anti-Semitism is by and large influenced by Christian anti-Semitism, through re-workings of the *Protocols*, which through its distribution by the Orthodox clergy of Greece has been absorbed in a variety of narratives flourishing in the cultic milieu. This is no surprise, since epsilonist anti-Semitism is deeply rooted in a demonology that also has explicitly Christian features, and an eschatology that displays similarities to Jewish apocalyptic ideas.

Despite its claims of distant origins in both time and space, it would seem that the longevity and inherent plausibility of the Epsilon Team could be explained partially by socio-economic and political factors, and partially through the fact that it shares a narrative format with the earlier myth of the Secret Schools, which has been institutionalised and propagated as a key myth in the state's narrative of modern Greece as a religiously homogenous, Orthodox Christian country with a cultural continuity with the past. Whereas the Secret Schools protected the 'true Greeks' against oppression from the Ottomans, through the use of the 'technology' of literacy and Orthodox Christianity, the Epsilon Team is thought to protect the 'true Greeks' against oppression from the 'Jewish darkness', through divine DNA, superior military technology, and esoteric knowledge from 'the ancients'.

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CHAPTER 17

The Role of Conspiracy Theory in the Aum Shinrikyo Incident

Tsuji Ryutaro

1 Introduction

Studies of Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese NRM responsible for the deadly sarin gas attack on the Tokyo metro in 1994 and a number of other serious criminal events in the early 1990s, have frequently focused on the relation between apocalypticism and violence, and the influence of subcultures such as anime or occultism. The conspiracy theories that Aum insisted on—though sometimes mentioned in connection with their apocalypticism—have attracted far less attention. The crimes that Aum members committed cannot be explained simply as a product of internal factors of Aum itself, but also by the relationship between the group and the outside world. The role of conspiracy theories is therefore important, because they reveal something about Aum's view of wider society.

This chapter will examine the contents of Aum's conspiracy theories, focusing on two key points. First, how does Aum's conspiracism relate to the broader context of Japanese conspiracy culture? Aum's theories were not an idiosyncratic expression of the group's own peculiar logic; they were formed by combining elements circulating in a culture of conspiracy in the general public, and were themselves a part of that culture. Second, how do we understand the group's conspiracy theories in the context of its activities as a religious institution? I will examine the position of conspiracy theory in Aum's creed, faith, and attitude toward the outside world. Conspiracy theory occupied a far from trivial position in Aum's creed, penetrating into their daily activities; moreover, their views and attitude toward outside society were filtered by conspiracy theory. In addition, I will argue that the transformation of Aum's attitude toward the outside world from 'apocalypticism' to 'conspiracy theory' was one of the causes of the calamitous actions it committed.

This chapter makes use of a range of primary materials to assess Aum's conspiracism: the complete volumes of *Mahayana* (from July 1987 to May 1991) and *Vajrayana Sacca* (from August 1994 to Jun 1995), which were Aum's official magazines; *The Vajrayana Course Teaching System Textbook*, which contains

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recorded preachments of the group's founder, Asahara Shoko, from 5 August 1988 to April 30, 1994; and the official Aum website, aum-internet.org.[1] In addition, judicial records, books written by ex-members, and some papers and notebooks provided from an ex-member are referred to when needed.

2 The Framework of Aum's Conspiracy Theory

The major part of the conspiracy theory advocated by Aum can be seen in *Vajrayana Sacca* and on the "World Conspiracy Encyclopedia" page on Aum's official website; in particular *Vajrayana Sacca* no. 6 dedicated much space to the conspiracy theory. A serialised novel based on the conspiracy theory was also published in the magazine. Although actual names were replaced, individual persons and groups can be identified in the novel, such as the new religious movement Soka Gakkai, which Aum associated with demons dominating Japan, or the journalist Egawa Shoko, who had been conducting critical investigations of Aum.

The worldview behind the conspiracy theory was as follows. Aum operated with a distinction between two principles: the principle to pursue greed or pleasure, called "the laws of Venus"; and the principle to pursue "the truth," called "the laws of the Sun."[2] According to Aum, the latter principle will finally defeat the former, but in the present day, the world is ruled by the laws of Venus. The people who govern the modern world after the laws of Venus are part of a conspiracy (frequently called simply 'they'), and only Aum, embodying the principle of truth, is able to resist 'them'. They control countries and organisations all over the world, manipulate the flow of information, encourage people to indulge in material greed, and even plan mass killings by staging World War Three in order to gain control over the world (Aum n.d(b): 213).

According to Asahara, "the thing which ties people to the world of the material is the demon," and the demon is 'they'. However, they are free from material greed themselves. They are 'transcendent' human beings, who have reached the same high stage that Aum's practice seeks to reach. Human beings seized by a desire for material gain have no way to fight against their plan. Their twisted purpose is to save humanity from total annihilation, but only by exterminating

1 I am relying on conspiracy-related content that I stored and collected prior to the website's removal in the second half of 1999.

2 'The laws of Venus' and 'the laws of the Sun' were borrowed from Michel de Nostredame, often understood in Japan as prophesying that the Messiah will rise in Japan (Nostradamus 1815: 98; Goto 1987: 189–194).

"unnecessary souls" and managing the rest. Powerful though they are, they lack true mercy and are still considered to be at a low stage compared with Aum's own attainments. Therefore, Aum's truth will eventually defeat the conspiracy.

The opposite axis penetrating Aum's worldview is a fight between 'materialism' (desire) and 'spirituality' (erasing desire). The structural outline of the conspiracy theory contrasts the sinister conspiracy with Aum's salvation project, placing the false world brimming with harmful information and the ignorant and blind public at the center. If materialism wins, the governing classes of the world will completely rule over the majority of the people. If spirituality wins, a utopia where people can approach God will come true. Aum said, "The choice is up to you. The one thing you are sure of is that you have no time left" (Aum 1994c: 90–94).

The cases, persons, and organisations that Aum came to view as part of the conspiracy diverged into many branches. Because I cannot examine all in detail here, I divide them into some categories and summarise.

First, those responsible for real and perceived attacks on Aum Sinrikyo itself came to be seen as agents of the conspiracy. Public criticism against Aum started with the article "The Insanity of Aum Shinrikyo" ("オウム真理教の狂気") in the weekly magazine *Sunday Mainichi* in 1989 (*Sunday Mainichi* 2012 [1989]). Reports and investigations of cases where Aum came under suspicion were all considered as the results of deliberate conspiracy, aimed to suppress the group. Aum also claimed that there were direct attacks on them with poison gas. It was said that the purpose was to crush Aum, which was the last hope for world salvation, and the conspiracy's last obstacle. The state, the police, and the security police were seen as the central agents of this conspiracy. It was suggested that Soka Gakkai took part in some cases as well. The alleged gas attack on Aum's community was carried out by the Japan Self-Defense Forces and the US armed forces (Aum n.d. (b): 288–292). The sarin gas attack on the Tokyo metro was perpetrated by the government itself, in order to crush Aum (Aum 1995d: 56–101). As is well known, the Tokyo metro gas attack was in fact carried out by Aum itself. The same is true for the claim that Aum facilities were attacked by poisonous gas: it seems that gas leaked out from a plant in their facilities. Therefore, Asahara must have known that these claims were contrary to fact. However, this was the explanation that he gave Aum members. The importance of this point will be considered later on.

Second, Aum insisted that the conspiracy conducted mind control. According to Aum, 'they' controlled the public by controlling all information. The mass media circulate information that seduces the public to material greed, so that people become like animals. The mass media deny authorities, such as government or religion, which should be relied on, and thereby clear the

public's mind and manipulate it by pouring biased information (Aum 1994a: 24–25; 1995b: 45–58).

In addition, it is said that they conduct mind control that leads people to praise the USA, by such means as school education, films, and the publishing industry. In Aum's opinion, the United States is a failed economy, abundant in brutal murders, sexual moral decadence, and unemployment. 'They' are going to transform Japan into a terrible country by making the Japanese adore and imitate the United States. Bullying in Japanese schools, brutal crimes, and the sex industry were given as examples where the strategy was already working (Aum 1995a: 90; 1994b: 161–164).

Aum also claimed that brainwashing takes place by mechanical means. For example, "a system controlling one's mind by electromagnetic waves" is incorporated in mobile phones (Aum 1995b: 89–96; n.d. (a)). In addition, it was said that the United States has repeatedly experimented with brainwashing weapons, including through the MK ULTRA program in 1953. Aum insisted that the High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP), an ionospheric research program, was both a weather weapon using electromagnetic waves, and the absolute mind control weapon. They said, "What are they going to destroy with this weapon? The target is patriot groups which obstruct globalization and unification by the dark world government or people who discover the truth" (Aum n.d. (a)).

Third, Aum insisted that the conspiracy was manipulating history. At first, they considered the United States' relationship towards Japan in modern times to be aimed at occupation. Since the arrival of the Matthew Perry squadron in 1853, which forced Japan to open its boarders to American trade, the United States' purpose was occupation of Japan. This long-held desire was accomplished by causing World War II. Contemporary Japan was now a dependency of the United States. The Self-Defense Forces were organised to protect Americans. The US forces stationed in Japan existed not to protect Japan, but to watch and to attack it. GHQ,[3] which administrated occupied Japan after the war, suppressed all the good aspects of Japanese culture, and implanted praise of America in Japanese minds. This made the Japanese into slaves. Traditional Japanese eating habits were destroyed, and junk food imported from America undermined the Japanese body and mind. It was said that privatisation of the Nippon Telegraph, the Telephone Public Corporation, and Japan National Railways were part of a conspiracy to control Japanese infrastructure. The so-called 'financial Big Bang', deregulation implemented in the financial industry in late

3 General Headquarters, officially known as the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP).

1990s, was also a plot to take over Japan, orchestrated by Jewish financiers, including the Rothschilds. The economic depression of the 1990s that followed the burst of the economic bubble was also part of their plan—just like the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Trade frictions between Japan and the United States and rising anti-Japanese sentiments were the same. These plots, just like Pearl Harbor before it, were preparations to make Japan into a villain and cause a new Japanese-American War. Aum asserted that the United States, which has large debts to Japan, intended to destroy the country (Aum 1994a: 41–56, 74–75; 1995a: 66–68). About the American policy toward Japan, Aum wrote:

> Making GHQ play a central role, the United States have taken away Japan's arms and legs by taking food and energy after the war. On the other hand, they intend to develop Japanese industry focused mainly on high technology industries, to let Japan accumulate great wealth, and then to smash all at once. That is precisely as if cooking a pig after fattening in a pig farm. And now, Japan which is in a blind alley economically is provoked by America and is running its course toward a state of war.
>
> AUM N.D. (A).

As a matter of course, the conspiracy to manipulate history extended beyond Japan to the whole world. The conspiracy steered the world towards realisation of the New World Order. It was said that their plots could be seen behind many important events in world history. For example, the Black Death pandemic in fourteenth-century Europe was their work. The French Revolution was staged by the Freemasons. Republicanism and liberalism were their methods for replacing effective autocracy with mobocracy, and thereby weaken a nation. The construction called the 'Cold War' between the East and the West was under their direction, too. The reason why the Soviet Union collapsed was that its position as the villain against the Western world was no longer needed. In addition, it was said that all regional conflicts and civil wars of the world were contrived for the profit of war industries and experiments in new weapons by the United States and the United Nations. They had also made a plan to slaughter three billion people through war, starvation, and epidemics by 2000. Both Ebola and AIDS were biological weapons that they had produced.

Their ultimate goal was a world government. Therefore, all things declaring international cooperation and coordination were suspected to be part of the conspiracy. One of their scenarios is to create the world government by depriving the nations of the world of power through global financial crises, and putting nations under the administration of international organisations. Finally, a 'biochip' will be buried in human bodies, performing every function

from shopping to identification. In this planned future society, all humankind will be managed by the chip (Aum 1995a: 67–88; 1995c: 15–44; 1995e: 43–48, 160–163). As Aum put it: "The word 'the world is one' is poisoned" (1995a: 61).

Aum also denounced other conspiracies, that were less directly linked to Japan. For example, the Holocaust was invented by Jews, as a pretext for the founding of Israel. Princess Diana was assassinated by "The Club of the Isles"—a network of royal aristocrats headed by the British royal family—or by the United States, in order to remove both Diana and the British royal family. Aum did not say which is more likely; all that mattered for them was the existence of conspiracy. The Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 was perpetrated by the US government in order to crush anti-federalist militias and strengthen the authority of the federal government. The Beatles was a brainwashing campaign planned by the Tavistock Institute in the United Kingdom. John Lennon sang about their purpose in "Imagine," and so on and so forth (Aum 1994a: 42–45; 1994c: 88; 1995a: 52–53; n.d. (a)).

Additionally, Aum claimed that the conspirators used various symbols, such as eyes and the number 666 in order to signal and display their own power. Various examples were given: the eye in the pyramid on the one dollar bill is a Freemasonic symbol; the mountain seen on a 5000-yen bill is not Mt. Fuji, but Mt. Sinai; the number 666 is hidden in the bar codes attached to commodities (Aum 1995a: 15). In this way, Aum came to interpret everything, from daily trivial affairs to big historical events, through the filter of conspiracy.

3 The Sequence of the Rise of Aum's Conspiracy Theory

The modern world is the age of Mappo,[4] which is completely polluted by materialism. The last opportunity to choose between ruin and regeneration of the world is now. Only Aum's truth can save the world and bring back the times of the right law, Syobo. Aum consistently stressed this view from the beginning. Interpreting criticism against Aum as the stratagem of a sinister conspiracy can also be observed from an early stage. The same can be said about the viewpoint that secular society was polluted by wrong information. By contrast, the claim that the conspiracy was manipulating world history only appears later. In the following passages, I will trace the historical development of Aum's conspiracy theory.

4 The degenerate age. Buddhism operates with three 'ages', based on the treatment of Buddha's discipline, or Dharma: the Former Day of the Law, Syobo (正法) in Japanese, when Dharma is upheld; the Middle Day of the Law, Zoho (像法), when Dharma manages to be maintained; and the Latter Day of the Law, Mappo (末法), when Dharma declines.

3.1 *The Early Stage: The End of the 1980s*

The theme of brainwashing by the mass media appeared in Aum's earliest publications. In *Mahayana* no. 16, there were statements such as "the media brainwash us to adopt nationalism similar to [that during] World War II through making us addicted to hedonism and stop any thinking … can we, who are drenched with nationalistic manipulation of information, judge rightly?" (Aum 1988c: 58). When Aum were criticised or something went wrong, they were often imputed to someone's malicious obstructions. For example, when an interpreter could not be smoothly arranged for Asahara's trip to Tibet, he took it as someone's intentional obstruction of his practice (1988b: 27–38). Anti-Aum writings in the *Sunday Mainichi*, or problems related to official certification as a legal religious corporation were also attributed to conspiracies. However, these conspiracy theories were limited to certain magazines, a scoop-focused mass media, and persons of power trying to protect their vested interests. A global conspiracy was not assumed. Related to later theories, there was, however, a reference to Freemasonry in *Mahayana* no. 9, claiming that the number 666 referred to the sixth chakra, *ājñā-cakra*, and that Freemasons possessed the full abilities of this chakra: "If they can do everything at their pleasure, of course, it is possible that they rule over the world" (1988a: 54). However, at this stage there was not a clear claim of a global conspiracy.

3.2 *The Middle Stage: From 1990 to the Summer of 1992*

In August 1989, Aum formed a political party named "The Party of Truth" (真理党), and in February 1990, Asahara ran in the general election for the House of Representatives. Asahara explained the reason for the advance into politics as follows:

> Our plan to construct 'Shambhala', the ideal world based on Aum's truth, is not accepted by current men of power with the bad karma, as is clear from an obstruction of certification as a religious corporation. It is not sufficient to practice the sacred dharma. It is necessary to strengthen the profane foundation through economy and politics.
>
> AUM N.D. (B): 77–80.

Asahara also said it was crucial to gain political power by 1999, otherwise they would not make it in time for Armageddon (Tsukada 2015: 214). Aum's purpose was to construct an ideal world in the real world, impelled by a sense of apocalypticism. Therefore, the failure of this political attempt would make the group feel more impatient with and disappointed by secular society.

After Asahara was defeated in the election, he began to make clear mention of a conspiracy. In an interview in *Mahayana* no. 31, he talked about how

Freemasonry controls the world. The article titled "Demon Nature—it is Material" provided an outline of later conspiracy theories, such as 'they' ruling the world since the Middle Ages, and planning a human purge (Aum 1990: 11–30). However, in subsequent issues of *Mahayana*, and in speeches by Asahara until late 1992, there was no clear mention of a grand conspiracy.

Later, Asahara said that the 1990 election had been a test of Mahayana (Aum n.d. (b): 278). After the election, Asahara frequently preached that the group had to proceed on the path of 'Tantra-vajrayana' in this age of Mappo. Simply put, in Aum, Mahayana referred to the voluntary and gradual salvation through raising all souls to the stage of Aum's attainment, while Tantra-vajrayana was the involuntary and sudden salvation brought about solely by the power of the guru. What we see here is an abrupt change in Asahara's view of salvation, as well as in the attitude toward the surrounding secular society. This theological development coincided with an increased inclination to conspiracy theories.

3.3 *The End Stage: From Late 1992 to 1994*

Asahara frequently made mention of a conspiracy in the two years leading up to the sarin gas attacks in 1994. Furthermore, a development can be traced through the following distinct periods.

The first period stretches from September 1992 to the end of the year. This period saw an increase in references to a conspiracy, at the same time as a prophecy of Armageddon began to be emphasised. In the preachment of November 22, Asahara said that "people who control this world" were already planning the next war (Aum n.d. (b): 177). On December 18, he said that "enemies of Aum were backed by Christianity, in other words, Judaism made by Freemasonry," and that Aum's current hardship was "because the world was completely invaded by demon, that is, Mara" (188).[5]

A second period can be discerned from March to April 1993, when Aum started to study poisonous gases. A significant number of preachments during this period were related to conspiracy theory. On March 20, Asahara said that Japan was going to pay a severe penalty for the sinful deed of persecuting Aum, namely, "the elimination of Karma." One of the penalties will be the decline of the Japanese economy at the hands of Freemasonry (Aum n.d. (b): 190). From March 21 to 28, further mentions of Freemasonry were made. According to these speeches, although the Freemasons had been looking forward

5 In Buddhism, Mara is the demon that attempted to interrupt Buddha's spiritual enlightenment. The demon is regarded as the avatar of Kleshas, or the desire for worldly things.

to the advent of Jesus, they were now trying to change the world for themselves because they could not wait (210).

Preachments of early April were as follows. "People with great wisdom" (Jews, Illuminati, and Freemasonry) were behind the USA, Russia, and China, and run the world. 'They' controlled unenlightened persons by providing carnal pleasures. 'They' were planning Armageddon in order to separate completely the humans who had the possibility to approach gods from those who fell to *San-akushu* (the "Three Evil Paths": the worlds of hell, hungry spirits, and animals). The difference between the conspiracy and Aum was that 'they' did not have *Shi-muryoushin* (the "Four Immeasurables": Loving-kindness, Compassion, Appreciative joy, and Equanimity) (Aum n.d. (b): 233, 244–245, 256–262, 267–268).

The development of conspiracism in Aum entered a third stage in October 1993. In December of that year, Aum would plan the killing of Ikeda Daisaku, the leader of Soka Gakkai. On 6 and 7 October, Asahara took a decisively adversarial stand against Soka Gakkai by saying that the political dominance of this new religious movement was progressing. Asahara also said that "the time given to us is only until March 1994," and that "all people and phenomena hindering the spread of the truth belong to the power of the demon." Aum had to crush these demonic forces and spread the law (Aum n.d. (b): 278–279). In addition, on October 25, there was a claim that Aum had been attacked with a poisonous gas since around the end of the previous November (288).

The final stage of development runs from March to April 1994. In February, sarin production was in full swing and the production of automatic rifles was ordered; they succeeded in making a trial rifle, but ultimately failed to mass-produce. In April, military training was conducted in Russia. On March 11, Asahara proclaimed that there was an enormous difference in value between the souls of Aum's saints and those of unenlightened people; Japan had oppressed Aum's valuable souls. In retaliation, the country was now going to suffer the same tragic fate as the Jews. It was also said that the conspiracy that prepared the Japan-US war and plotted to install a one-world government were afraid of Asahara and Aum. The defeat of Aum in the general election proved that Japan was completely controlled by the conspiracy. At this rate, Aum would eventually be destroyed in the same way as the Branch Davidians. "I have never been willing to fight against this nation. But if I wouldn't fight, I and my pupils should be destroyed by the nation" (Aum n.d. (b): 293–300). On March 21, Asahara claimed that he had been monitored by the joint forces of the Vatican and the Tokyo Broadcasting System during his stay in Russia, and that he was the target of an assassination plot by right-wingers, persons related to Mikhail Gorbachev, the Vatican, and the CIA (330). Many other speeches in this period included all of these conspiratorial elements.

4 The Broader Context: Aum and Japanese Conspiracy Culture

Psychic ability, apocalyptic prophecies, super-ancient history, and pseudoscience. Networks and magazines trading in 'rejected' or 'stigmatized knowledge' played a role in the construction of Aum's thought system and in recruiting members to the group. Above all, many people point out that an article about the levitation of Asahara published in the magazines *Twilight Zone* and *Mu* greatly contributed to the recruitment of followers.[6] Asahara himself published an article titled "Visionary super ancient metal HIHIIROKANE have existed" in *Mu* in November 1985.

Researchers such as Miyadai Shinji and Robert Jay Lifton point to the prevalence of 'occult' and eschatological notions in Japan at the time as a background for the growth of Aum. Harada Minoru, who studies pseudo-histories, considered the relation between *Mu*, Asahara, and Takeda Sugen (his real name is Takeda Yoichi), the founder of Hachiman Bookstore. Takeda is the son-in-law of Deguchi Yasuaki, who was a grandson of Deguchi Onisaburo, the second spiritual leader of the Japanese religious movement, Oomoto. Hachiman Bookstore is a publisher that deals with pseudo-histories: Mikkyo as an esoteric form of Buddhism in Japan, Koshinto as the alleged ancient form of Shinto, and so on. According to Harada, Takeda is the person responsible for building up the base of the occult industry in modern Japan. Hachiman Bookstore is known for the publication of a famous apocryphal book known as *The Takeuchi Document.*[7] The metal 'hihiirokane' that Asahara's aforementioned article refers to comes up in *The Takeuchi Document*. According to Harada, there were some advertisements for Hachiman Bookstore and Aum in each number of *Mu* at that time, and the magazine essentially functioned as their public relations magazine. Harada (1995) argues that from the late 1970s through early 1980s many ex-left-wing activists found a means of resistance against conventional society in occultism and the pseudo history movement. A key representative of this trend was Ota Ryu, who was one of Japan's most famous conspiracy theorists and energetically introduced European and American conspiracy theories to a Japanese audience. In the 1950s he had been famous as a communist activist who insisted on violent revolution. Afterwards he was an active spokesperson for the emancipation of minorities, including the Ainu people; then as a

6 *Twilight Zone* was discontinued in December 1989, but *Mu* remains a representative occult magazine in Japan.

7 *The Takeuchi Document* is a series of documents which was brought out in 1928 and later, by Takeuchi Kiyomaro. It claims that the origin of the Imperial House of Japan dates back hundreds of millions of years, and that Japan is at the heart of the world.

super-reactionary who aimed for a return to the prehistoric Jomon era, and as a deep-ecologist who advocated total abolition of domestic animal systems. He also ran in elections for the House of Councillors in 1986, the Tokyo gubernatorial election in 1987, and the House of Representatives in 1990 and 1993. After the 1990s, he embraced anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and then claimed, under the influence of David Icke, that 'reptilians' conspired to govern the earth. Hans Ruesch's influential book on animal testing, *Naked Empress*, which Aum cited as a reference, was translated into Japanese by Ota. He also translated many important conspiracy books, such as books by Eustace Mullins, Fritz Springmeier, and John Coleman. It is easy to consider that Aum drew influence from these works.

In any case, conspiracy theory was clearly an element of the occult milieus from which Aum emerged. In Japan from the late 1980s through the early 1990s, the Jewish plot became particularly popular. Representative of that trend are two best-selling books by Uno Masami, both published in 1986: *To Watch Jews is to See the World Clearly*, and *To Watch Jews is to See Japan Clearly*. Uno's claim was as follows: the United States is ruled by a Jewish 'shadow government', which orchestrated World War II in order to crush Japan, because they were afraid of Japanese excellence. They destroyed the Japanese folk spirit through the post-war policies. The Japanese people were enslaved by money and material goods, and Japan was turned into the world's factory. However, Japan developed economically more than they expected and came to have possibilities to threaten the Jewish world conquest. Therefore, they now push forward plans to weaken Japan. They are going to devastate the Japanese economy by causing a new Great Depression in 1990, just as they had done in 1929 (Uno 1986a: 148–184).

The resemblance to Aum's claims is apparent. In the first place, most Japanese conspiracy theories are imported from Europe and America. For example, the plot that Uno insists on is an exact copy of the theories based on Christianity found in Springmeier and the like. Uno is a fundamentalist who has announced prophecies based on the Bible, and he is the founder of Liberty Intelligence Inc., the Japanese counterpart to the extreme right-wing Liberty Lobby in the United States (Uno 1990: 287). He has only replaced the white supremacism of American conspiracy theorists with Japanese supremacism.

Aum also cited the writings of Gary Allen and John F. McManus of the John Birch Society (Aum 1995a: 34). The claim that Japan had been corrupted by American occupation can be found in many other Japanese conspiracy theorists, including Ota Ryu. At any rate, Aum's conspiracism developed from elements that had already spread in the general public, including *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In this sense, their claim lacked originality. It was an ordinary case of conspiracy theory and not an abnormal one.

The conspiracy theory of Aum comes under the type of 'the New World Order conspiracy', in Michael Barkun's terms. Common denominators are as follows:

1. Schemers try to destroy existing nations, races, and religions, and form one world government. All humankind will become slaves, and a few elites will rule over them.
2. The United Nations, multinational corporations, foundations, think tanks, new religious movements, and the like, all participate in the conspiracy. They are related closely and form a unified network. Above all, Jews, Freemasonry, and the Illuminati are important components of the conspiracy network.
3. Modern society is almost completely controlled by the evil group already. The final accomplishment of the conspiracy is coming up soon.
4. The evil influence of the conspiracy has invaded not only politics and economics, but also everyday life.

These conspiracy theories express negative value judgments of modern society, and provide a framework for reinterpreting the world based on one's own values. If unacceptable realities can be interpreted as the result of an evil conspiracy, all of those realities can be 'understood' without having to doubt the correctness of one's set of values.

Barkun points out that the core role of a conspiracy theory is to identify 'evil' definitively and to offer a meaningful and orderly view of the world (Barkun 2003. Psychologically, a sense of impending crisis and urgency that justice is threatened is typically observed in people insisting on a conspiracy theory. A sense of superiority over the 'ignorant crowd', a sense of isolation from society at large, and a sense of duty that only oneself possesses penetrating insight into the truth, are other typical marks (Tsuji 2012: 254–261).

Although it cannot be denied that religion and conspiracy theory can have similar functions in respect of supplying meaning and order, conspiracy theories have some peculiar features. First, as mentioned above, they express negative value judgments against existing society. Second, a conspiracy theory is a frame of logic that reinforces the values that one already possesses, rather than providing a new set of values. It is thought that the logic of conspiracy theory can in principle justify whatever kind of values. Thus, a conspiracy theory about the evils of modernity that came out of conservative statements supporting the 'Ancien Régime' after the French Revolution is now often recycled as the claim of a conspiracy that threatens the values of contemporary liberal society. *Proofs of a Conspiracy* by John Robison (1798) or *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are examples of this trend. Third, a statement of conspiracy theory is typically not accepted by ordinary authorities or intellectuals. Conversely,

a statement accepted by mainstream society is not called a conspiracy theory. In short, a conspiracy theory is a 'marginal' or 'heterodox' statement. And that is attractive to people who cannot be satisfied with mainstream explanations of a variety of things and wish for an alternative 'interpretation' or truth.

In light of these general points, we are in a position to consider the following questions: Why did Aum develop a conspiratorial narrative? What function did the conspiracy theory play in the organisation? How did it spread among the adherents?

5 Conclusion: The Role of Conspiracy Theory in Aum's Religious Life and Attitude toward the Outside World

Even in the early stages, before trying to advance into politics and making clear mention of a conspiracy theory, criticism against Aum and feelings of failure were explained as the result of a conspiracy. Later it was emphasised over and over again that the religious community was in a serious crisis owing to national oppression and that the day that Aum would be entirely liquidated by the government was approaching. At the same time, it was claimed that the oppression was because Asahara is Christ, and that the state was going to pay a dreadful penalty through 'the law of Karma'. A number of facts were listed as evidence that their "evil deeds are counted by God" (Aum n.d. (b): 333)—including the fact that the chief editor and chairman of *Sunday Mainichi* and Aum Shinrikyo Victims Society had fallen sick, that Kumamoto Prefecture (which had been in a conflict with Aum over their facilities in the prefecture) had suffered a flood and a typhoon, an outbreak of AIDS in Japan and the United States, abnormal weather, stock price crash and the like. "[T]he fact that we are now in such a situation is the proof that we are groups of Christ"; Aum would certainly win in the end as long as it kept practicing the truth (309).

Such statements were abundant in Asahara's preaching after March 1994. They would be used to justify the group's situation and to persuade believers. However, there is a tension between the statements of the early days and the last years. Probably, in the last years, Asahara and his executives understood that they were in a situation of no turning back. They would use the conspiracy theory to warn about forthcoming investigations by the police and to justify Aum's crimes to believers. The assertion that the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo metro was someone else's plot to entrap Aum was also made in this context. This assertion was without doubt a blatant falsehood. However, we must not generalise and think that Aum had always asserted its conspiracy theories as mere trickery. As described above, Aum's conspiracy theories had been

advocated since long before the gas attack case. Interpreting the gas attack as an attack against Aum itself was plausible from the viewpoint that the group had cultivated. Justifying Aum's actions with recourse to these conspiracy theories was persuasive to members only because there was already a well-established background of conspiratorial thinking.

In regard to conspiracy theories that were not directly related to perceived threats to Aum itself, some were adopted in the same form as they were already being spread in the general public, while others were adapted to a form that best suited Aum's values and interests. For example, the claim that the Illuminati is behind various esoteric groups is common. Thus, Aum viewed the conspirators as people who had almost reached the highest stage of spiritual development that Aum's own practice aimed at. The esoteric practices that the conspiracy used to attain its power, then, were not necessarily regarded as evil. Their power had the same root as Aum's own system, but 'they' were confused and did not reach the final stage. Moreover, adopting the basic claims of a conspiracy theory, Aum usually reinterpreted the purpose of the conspiracy so that it became all about indoctrinating people with a materialistic desire. In other words, Aum adapted existing conspiracy theories to reinforce their own pre-existing values.

Aum built a system of conspiracy theories that supported and defended their own values. It functioned as a kind of theodicy. In other words, seemingly unreasonable events called for reasons beyond human intelligence. Particularly, the stupidity of the public or 'the law of Karma' could not alone be sufficient explanations for the fact that the group was not paid any respect by society at all. They could not help but sense the existence of malice, and they believed that for a hidden enemy to be capable of interfering with Aum, which was so great, it too would have to be very powerful. Asahara's talks about his defeat in the election seem to express his subjective feeling of having been rejected decisively by society. Aum's conspiracy theory functioned as a legitimation for their activities, an explanation for their obscurity and lack of success, the existence of a powerful enemy, and, eventually, the necessity of a violent struggle with society.

Considered as a whole, Aum's conspiracy theories were not consistent and had many contradictions. When it comes to the origins of the conspiracy, for example, it was sometimes said to have begun in the fourteenth century when the Black Death ravaged through Europe (Aum 1990: 12); other times it was traced back to the fifth to sixth centuries, when the Babylonian Talmud was edited (1995a: 41), or even as far back as 3,000 years ago (n.d. (a)). The ringleader of the conspiracy was vague, too, although it was explained that the Jews were the leaders, the Illuminati was central, and Freemasonry was the operational team.

However, those contradiction and vagueness didn't matter too much. Asahara said of the subject of the conspiracy that "They are called various names such as 'Freemasonry' or 'Illuminati', but those names are no more than symbols. Their true character is 'Mara', or the Evil One. This is because sacred texts define that the existence which dominates us by using materialistic desire is Mara" (Aum n.d. (b): 262). The details didn't matter—it was the very existence of a conspiracy, and the explanations it afforded of the present situation, that were important.

It is not easy to measure how deeply these conspiracy theories were internalised by the group and its members. It is unlikely that all members believed everything, or, conversely, that they only pretended to believe it. According to Hayasaka Takenori, a former mid-level executive of Aum, most members were half in doubt about Asahara's assertion to have suffered a gas attack (Hayasaka 1998: 284). At the same time, Tsutiya Masami, who played an important role in manufacturing sarin and carrying out the Tokyo metro gas attack, claimed that the sarin gas used in both Matsumoto city and the Tokyo metro was not the same as the one he had made, but rather had been produced by hidden conspirators who infiltrated Aum, possibly agents of the state (Furihata 2004: 22–38).

The group's forms of practices and communal living give further hints. Their attitude to information was to shut 'bad' information out and put 'good' information in. Members should aim to become 'a clone of the Guru': an Aum textbook contained a word-for-word transcript of Asahara's sermons, and their learning strategy was memorisation by rote. A test consisted of "fill in the blanks"-type questions of the speeches (Aum 1992). "The Guide to Practice for Members," which had been "edited in order to let you know the meanings, merits, and methods of basic practices," also consisted of Asahara's preachments almost from cover to cover (n.d. (c)). Therefore, it is difficult to believe that the claims of conspiracy that appeared in such literature had no influence on members.

How deeply did the adoption of explicit conspiracism affect the doctrines of Aum? Aum's way of thinking had, as we have seen, included *affinities* with conspiracy theory from the beginning. A sense that something is wrong with current society, a sense of impending apocalyptic crisis, and a sense that Aum is the last hope are all detectable in Aum's doctrines. A worldview based on the fight between materialism and spirituality were consistent from beginning to end, as were their attitudes to the media. The prediction of a future economic war between Japan and the USA, a massive recession, the rearmament of Japan, an escalation to war with America, and, eventually, Armageddon—all these elements can be found from early on in the movement, without being explicitly couched in terms of conspiracy theory.

The full-scale introduction of a conspiracist narrative led to two important changes. First, the 'enemy' that Aum had to remove became concrete. The concept that human greed and materialism pushed the world in the wrong direction did not change; however, before conspiracy theory, the cause that led the world to doomsday was 'destiny' or 'Karma'. Aum had said, "Ironically, as a result that we have lived selfishly in order to maintain our petit bourgeois well-being, we have nurtured a fearful egg from which the merciless destruction of our own hope is hatched" (Aum 1987a: 4–5). The cause had always been an impersonal 'Law'. After the introduction of conspiracy theory, the plot became driven by an evil group of conspirators. This enemy was more concrete and clear than an abstract Law. However, it is different from the sort of concreteness that can be pointed to directly, and has a firm substance. Aum could shift the subject of the conspiracy in sequence: Jews, Freemasonry, Illuminati, the United States, the United Nations, the security police, and so forth. These were all the many faces of the enemy, but the enemy itself remained hidden behind them all, never to be touched directly. It might be said that Aum found a higher will behind social facts in the same way as natural theologians found the will of God behind the laws of nature.

Second, Aum's view on salvation changed. The claim of early Aum had been that the world could have been saved by promoting as many people as possible to 'the attainments' of Aum's practice and thus fill the whole world with holy vibration (Aum 1987b: 10–16). Later, however, after adopting a worldview where conspiracy ruled supreme, they said: "We can't bear to be manipulated anymore. We shouldn't just wait to be slaughter like domesticated animals!" (1994a: 76–81). *Vajrayana Sacca* no. 8, which focused on how to survive disaster and war, stated that "the door of the one and only perfect survival group in Japan is open just to you, to your survival" (1995c: 95). What can be found here is a shift from the full-scale salvation of the world and construction of a global Utopia, to survival only for the group itself, following a final, violent confrontation with evil. Although the necessity of deliverance from earthly bondage was continuous, its centre of balance moved from gaining the power for salvation, to becoming super-human in order to survive doomsday.

Aum came to represent outside society not only as what was merely idiotic or wrong, but also as what was evil or malicious. They did not throw away the original idea of salvation, that is, their eschatology. The filter of conspiracy theory covered their thought, and the world came to be interpreted through that filter. As a consequence, society outside of the group became the antagonist at the same time as the object of salvation. This might be one trigger that shifted their attitude of 'the end' from the abstract and metaphysical to the concrete, where violent action had to be taken.

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CHAPTER 18

Framing of a Conspiracy Theory: The *Efendi* Series

Turkay Nefes

1 Introduction

Conspiracy theories often function as popular conduits of ethno-religious hatred and conflict. For example, they constitute the backbone of anti-Semitic ideology and were used commonly by the Nazi regime (Bronner 2003). This chapter explores the conspiratorial rhetoric about a secretive Judaic society in Turkey, called Dönmes. To avoid an early confusion about this community, it should be stated that Dönmes are a real religious group that has been a subject of various conspiratorial accounts since the early twentieth century.

The academic literature has two main perspectives with regards to the social and political significance of conspiracy accounts, namely the 'classical' and the 'cultural' perspectives (Nefes 2013). The 'classical' view regards conspiracy theories as products of political paranoia (Hofstadter 1965; Goertzel 1994; Pipes 1997; Robins and Post 1997; Aaronovitch 2009). It emphasises that conspiracy literature tends to lead readers to distorted, paranoid, extremist views and that it is widespread among marginal political groups. The 'cultural' approach does not share the pathologisation of the classical approach by arguing that conspiracy theories are symptoms of society that provide alternative ways of thinking (Knight 2000; Melley 2000; Birchall 2006; Bratich 2008; Olmsted 2009). It views conspiracy theories as alternative explanations of political and social events and investigates why they are appealing to people. Melley (2000) argues that it is agency panic—intense anxiety about loss of autonomy or self-control—that today drives people towards conspiracy theories, which provide integrating stories for shattered personalities.

This chapter relies on a content analysis of the two most popular conspiracy theory books in Turkey in the 2000s: *Efendi 1: Beyaz Türklerin Büyük Sırrı* (The Big Secret of the White Turks) (Yalçın 2004) and *Efendi 2: Beyaz Müslümanların Büyük Sırrı* (The Big Secret of the White Muslims) (Yalçın 2006). It focuses on the *Efendi* series' political frames and investigates the ways in which power relations are described in conspiracy theories about Dönme. It highlights how a right-wing conspiratorial rhetoric has been transformed into a left-wing conspiracy theory. In order to do that, the study explores the content of the series and the discussion it created in the Turkish

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media. It concludes that the conspiratorial account is in line with the political views and interests of the author, Soner Yalçın, which implies that conspiratorial accounts are proposed and interpreted in line with political perspectives (Nefes 2014; 2015b).

2 The Dönme Community

Dönme ('convert' in Turkish) is the name of a secretive Judaic society whose origins date back to the seventeenth century. The Dönme community holds the belief that Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676) was the awaited messiah of the Jews. This was first declared by Nathan of Gaza in 1665, and quickly spread among the Jewish community and beyond (Nefes 2013). The Ottoman Empire took action against Zevi's growing influence and forced him to convert to Islam (Şişman 2008). He took a Muslim name, Aziz Mehmed Efendi, and became an employee of the Ottoman emperor. Subsequently, because of the doubts about the genuineness of Zevi's conversion, he was sent to Ülgün, a small town in today's Albania, where he spent his last years. Predictably, Zevi lost most of his followers after his conversion, but a small minority of several hundred families continued to believe that he was the Messiah (Nefes 2013). These people constituted the root of the Dönme community. They formed a secret society, who presented themselves as Muslims in public while remaining believers in Zevi. Like other secret groups, they had strict norms with regards to members' contact with the public; for example, not allowing marriage with outsiders. Despite such prohibitions, their existence was known in the Ottoman Empire; they were an "open secret" (Baer 2004). The general tolerance of the community's existence in the Ottoman period changed during the Turkish Republic era, however, when conspiratorial accusations began to be aimed at the Dönmes.

In the late nineteenth century, some community members played important roles in the modernisation movement in the Ottoman Empire. The majority of the Dönmes lived in Salonika, hotbed of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which was one of the main proponents of modernisation. Dönmes such as Mehmed Cavid Bey took active roles in the CUP. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the Dönmes were forced to migrate to Turkey from Greece, as a part of the population exchange between Greece and Turkey. They mostly settled in Istanbul. Another important event that influenced the fate of the community was the Capital Levy of 1942, which imposed heavy taxes on non-Muslim minorities in Turkey. It included the Dönmes in the non-Muslim category, which surprised the community as they considered themselves an

invisible group. In the 1990s and 2000s, the community attracted public attention mainly due to popular conspiracy theory books, notably the *Efendi* series.

Today, due to their secretive nature, the population of the Dönme is unknown. Nevertheless, Şişman (2010) argues that while there are approximately 75,000 people of Dönme origin, only some 3,000 to 4,000 still consider Zevi to have been the Messiah. The majority of this population is believed to be living in Istanbul. While conspiracy theorists and the general public see the Dönme community as a part of the Jewish minority in Turkey, a population of approximately 27,000 as of 2005 (Içduygu *et al.* 2008), these two communities are theologically and in practice pursuing distinct lives (Baer 2004).

2.1 *A Short History of the Conspiratorial Rhetoric*

Conspiracy theories about the Dönme community date back to the early twentieth century. Two important events gave rise to the conspiratorial rhetoric. First, in 1899, the leader of the World Zionist Organisation, Theodor Herzl, came to Istanbul with the intention of buying Palestine from the Sultan Abdulhamid II to establish a Jewish state. Herzl's request was declined by the Ottoman ruler. Nine years later, the emperor was toppled in a CUP-led *coup d'etat* and was forced to move to Salonica. Subsequently, various people argued that this intervention was plotted by Zionists because of his refusal to sell Palestine. These accounts saw the Dönme Mehmed Cavid Bey and Jewish-Freemason Emmanuel Carosso's involvement in the coup as proof of a Jewish conspiracy (Nefes 2012).

After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, conspiracy rhetoric entered a new phase. I have, in a previous work (Nefes 2012), underlined three important phases of conspiratorial accounts during this period: the single party period (1923–1950), the multi-party democracy period (1950–1990), and the post-1990 period. During the single party period, conspiratorial accounts began spreading following the petition of Karakaşzade Rüşdü, who claimed to be a Dönme himself. In 1924, he warned the Turkish parliament about the community and created a discussion in the media that lasted for a few weeks (Bali 2008). As the single party rule censored various conspiracy accounts, the conspiratorial rhetoric on the Dönme did not find much press after Rüşdü's petition.

This changed during the multi-party period, which eased the government's censorship over the groups who tended to publish the conspiracy theories—in this context, Islamists and nationalists (Bali 2002; Nefes 2012). From the 1990s, conspiratorial rhetoric spread beyond extreme right-wing publications. Two left-leaning intellectuals in particular wrote various popular accounts about the Dönme community, namely Yalçın Küçük and Soner Yalçın; the

latter's *Efendi* series (Yalçın 2004, 2006) became a bestseller in the Turkish book market.

Conspiracy rhetoric about the Dönme community portrays them as a secret clique holding prominent positions in Turkish politics, society, and economy. It claims that this secret clique follows its own interests, which often clash with the interests of the country. Moreover, conspiracy accounts highlight that the Dönmes establish secret alliances with foreign powers to achieve their aims. This continuous bad press was not accompanied by any organised anti-Dönme movements and remained an esoteric issue in popular culture. One of the most interesting aspects of this rhetoric is that it was not confined to one political group. While it was dominated by the Islamists, the left wing and nationalists also contributed to it. Their contributions varied in terms of content, as each political view has presented the Dönme community in a different way. Indeed, this chapter examines how a right-wing conspiracy theory was made popular in a left-wing perspective, using the *Efendi* series as an example.

3 Method: Frame Analysis

As the analysis relies on political frames in the *Efendi* series, we should provide a basic definition of frames. According to Goffman, people "locate, perceive, identify and label" everyday events through frames (1975: 21); he used frames to delineate how people make sense of the world through basic frameworks. Snow (2010) argues that frames do this by performing three functions: (1) frames orient our attention to what is relevant; (2) they help people to articulate the meaning of what is going on; (3) they transform people's views by constructing and reconstructing our perception of objects and their meanings. By examining the political frames in the *Efendi* series, this study helps us to understand what is really being said about the Dönme community, and contextualises the conspiratorial rhetoric within Turkish politics. Indeed, frame analysis can describe the individuals' use of political frames. It can analyse political communication by focusing on the ways people make sense of the world. Benford and Snow (2000) discuss how social movements construct political frames, and how these frames are perceived by individuals. They regard frames as a "conceptual scaffolding" by which social movements construct and modify political messages. From this perspective, conspiracy theories can be viewed as a type of frame that claims to explain what is going on as a consequence of secret plots of groups or individuals.

Political frames are often confused with ideology, and they are sometimes used as synonyms. Oliver and Johnston (2000) underline the difference between

ideology and frame by claiming that ideology is a system of ideas, while frames are interactive processes that can combine various ideological messages. In other words, frames are not as substantial as ideologies; rather, they are complementary. Hence, conspiracy theories can combine ideas from different political perspectives in their framing of power relations, whereas it is relatively more difficult to fuse many ideologies because of their normative boundaries. That is how proponents of opposing ideological views in Turkey could create and disseminate similar conspiratorial framing of Dönmes. While the core of the conspiratorial rhetoric blames Dönmes for various events, different political actors interpreted this theory in line with their political perspectives (Nefes 2012). Moreover, in my interviews with the readers of the *Efendi* series as well as political party representatives and conspiracy authors (Nefes 2013, 2015a, 2015b), I found that people create, interpret, and disseminate the conspiratorial rhetoric in line with their political stances. Frame analysis helps to understand what kinds of conspiracy frames the *Efendi* series use.

In order to do that, I need briefly to identify the basic political ideologies in Turkey: (a) Kemalism (Republicanism), (b) liberalism, (c) Turkish nationalism, (d) political Islam, and (e) the Kurdish minority movement. Named after the founding father of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Kemalism is a secular-modernist ideology which claims equality for all citizens regardless of their ethnic or religious identities. It stresses the secular character of the state and a top-down modernisation of society, in which the ethnic and religious identities are merged. Kemalism represents the centre in Turkish politics and opposes the Islamist and Kurdish movements (see İnsel 2006). Liberalism in Turkey is a political vision that suggests development and prosperity through integrating into the capitalist market. The liberal view, compared to Kemalism, is more flexible in terms of minority identities (see Yılmaz 2005). Turkish nationalism emphasises preserving Turkish culture while modernising the country. It opposes the left wing and the minority movements and defends the secular state view (see Gültenkil and Bora 2003). Political Islam supports the view that prosperity and justice should be achieved through an Islamic project. Political Islam underlines Muslim identity and counters the secular ideal of the Kemalist view (see Oktar 2001). The Kurdish movement seeks a democratic and multicultural society in which all minorities will be treated equally. The movement has a distinctive left-wing emphasis, and does not merely represent an ethnic movement. While the Kurdish movement could be located as a left-wing movement in the entire spectrum of Turkish politics, the Kemalist view could be seen as a centre-left approach. In addition, political Islam and Turkish nationalism are right-wing views and Turkish liberalism could be viewed as a centre-right stance.

4 Soner Yalçın and the *Efendi* Series

Yalçın is a left-wing writer, close to a secular and republican Kemalist standpoint. Together with Yalçın Küçük he is the most well-known author of conspiracy theories on the Dönmes today. In addition, Soner Yalçın was an adviser for two popular television series with conspiratorial themes, *The Valley of the Wolves* and *Sağıroda*. Yalçın was also a producer of a journalism programme on CNN Türk channel for ten years. After starting to produce television programmes, he signed a contract with the Doğan Book Publishers, a subsidiary of Turkey's most powerful media conglomerate, the Doğan Media Group (DMG) (Bali 2008: 112).

There are several reasons to choose the *Efendi* series for analysis. First, *Efendi 1* (Yalçın, 2004) and *Efendi 2* (2006) were best-sellers: *Efendi 1* has gone through 75 editions and sold 170,000 copies. Bali notes that this is an extraordinary success in the Turkish book market, as the majority of non-fiction books sell fewer than 2,000 copies (2008: 212). Showing the publisher's confidence in the book's popularity, the first edition of *Efendi 2* had a print run of 100,000 copies. By the beginning of 2009, *Efendi 2* had sold 114,000 copies.[1] During *Efendi 1*'s boom, there was also a wide illegal black market of photocopied books. Hence, the ownership of the book is likely to be higher than the official numbers.

The series also had a considerable impact: various journalists discussed the series in their columns, and the first book was also mentioned in the popular television series, *The Valley of the Wolves*. The books thus constitute a very visible, commonly read and widely discussed example of conspiracy rhetoric in Turkey. Furthermore, the *Efendi* series' content does not vary significantly from the other conspiracy theories on Dönmes. Tayfun Er, another contributor to the literature, even accused Yalçın of plagiarising him (Hepkon 2007: 209). Thus, the books are representative of the conspiracy theories about the community.

4.1 *The Content of* Efendi *1 and* Efendi *2*

The *Efendi* series claim to be historical research that is accessible to the general reader. In other words, the books are classified as non-fiction, and their arguments should be approached as research findings. *Efendi 1: Beyaz Türklerin Büyük Sırrı* (Yalçın 2004) describes the political life in Turkey, roughly from the second half of the nineteenth century until the mid-1950s, by narrating the story of the Evliyazade family, who are claimed to be Dönmes.

Yalçın starts by introducing some powerful families in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, where the reader meets the Evliyazades along with

1 The numbers were taken from Soner Yalçın during an interview (Nefes 2010).

Uşakizades. He argues that the members of these families tend to get married to each other and sees that as intra-group Dönme marriages; he relates Dönmes' intra-marriage rule to these marriages between rich families. Furthermore, Yalçın presents the existence of these family links as a proof of a Dönme conspiracy. For him, the powerful people, predominantly Dönmes, stay at the top through these family arrangements.

Yalçın focuses on the Evliyazades who were influential in politics, including Dr. Nazım, a prominent member of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). Dr. Nazım is portrayed as an idealist patriot, who does not hesitate to put his life in danger for his country. Indeed, he is the protagonist of *Efendi 1* until he is executed. Subsequently, the book introduces two other influential members of the Evliyazade family, Adnan Menderes and Fatin Rüşdü Zorlu, who were in power until they were executed in 1960. In short, *Efendi 1* depicts the power and the significance of the Dönme sect in Turkish political history through conspiracies.

Efendi 2 (Yalçın 2006) broadens the scope of the first book by focusing on the alleged roles of the Dönmes in Islamic sects such as Rifais and Mevlevis, Bektashis, Melamis, and Halvetis. It contends that Dönmes have been influential in politics through secretly dominating these Islamic groups. Hence, *Efendi 2* basically explores the Dönmes' alleged influence in Turkish politics through these Islamic sects, which it argues are all associated with Islamic mysticism (*tasavvuf*).

The argument is that as Dönme beliefs rely on Jewish mysticism, they found it easy to join these Islamic sects. To support this argument, Yalçın points to the distinctively modern character of these religious groups: the leader of Rifais, Kenan Rifai, was more of a Western intellectual than a religious sheikh. Accordingly, Yalçın calls the Dönmes who had secretly penetrated into Islamic sects "White Muslims," to refer to their elite character. This term is coined in analogy to 'White Turks', a term used to refer to upper classes in Turkey; it could be seen as the Turkish counterpart to the American WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). Yalçın argues that the Dönme version of Islam is propagated by the Turkish "deep state"—another alleged clandestine group. The term 'deep-state' is used in Turkish politics to refer to a secret clique that is alleged to have held power in Turkey since the establishment of the republic (see Freely 2007: 16). It is believed to consist of high level officials from the national intelligence service, the army, academia, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy, who hold an ultra-statist and nationalist ideology. The discussion on the deep state is thus another popular conspiracy theme in Turkish politics, as many associate unresolved political murders with this secret clique. Furthermore, according to Yalçın (2006), Dönmes easily gained religious authority, because the Turkish

populace was uneducated. Moreover, *Efendi 2* maintains that Jews have an inherent ability to fake conversion (Yalçın 2006: 255, 385). Therefore, they were successful in penetrating religious sects and influencing politics through Islam. It also talks about a global conspiracy network in which Israel and the United States have important roles.

4.2 *The Political Framework of the* Efendi *Series*

Efendi 1 frames Turkish politics in a similar way to the traditional Islamist conspiracy theory of the role of Jews/Dönmes in the CUP movement, which accuses Dönmes of dominating Turkish politics behind closed doors. However, Yalçın transforms this frame to a modernist-secular one. In so doing, he accuses Dönmes of being the local agents of capitalism, and his charges concentrate on Islamists, capitalists, and liberal governments. To start with, *Efendi 1* labels Dönmes as *White Turks*, to refer to their alleged elite status. Yalçın (2004: 228–229) argues that this status was achieved during the establishment of the Turkish Republic, as during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, all economic subsidies of the state went to Jews and Dönmes, an unverified and very unlikely claim. In parallel, the blurb of the book asks whether the reader has any relatives who were Prime Minister, Miss Europe, or a president of major Turkish football clubs such as Fenerbahçe or Galatasaray. Yalçın states that Evliyazades have such wealthy relatives because of being Dönmes. Yalçın adds that key positions in the government are transferred from father to son (462), implying that Dönmes are in control of key positions in Turkey through heredity.

Moreover, Yalçın talks about a historically omnipotent, hidden and active Dönme/Jewish network in *Efendi 1* and describes an active Jewish lobby in the Ottoman palace (Yalçın 2004: 406). For example, he claims that Sabbatai Zevi was not executed by the empire because of the powerful Jewish lobby (418). He adds that after the First World War some Dönmes established the Wilson Prensipleri Cemiyeti (the Wilson Principles Society), as US President Woodrow Wilson was a Zionist (245). The society aimed to save the Ottoman Empire from the invasion of foreign powers after the First World War. Their solution was to accept an American mandate based on the Fourteen Points for which Wilson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Yalçın links this with the false claim that ninety per cent of the United States ambassadors to Turkey have been Jewish in origin. Moreover, he accuses Jews of conspiring to create the problems between Turks and Greeks in Cyprus. He supports his argument by proposing that Cyprus is close to Israel, and there were alleged attempts to create a Jewish kingdom there in the Ottoman period (476).

Efendi 1 suggests that the Dönmes create hostilities, constitute the elite of Turkey, do not share the fate of the country, and live in a parasitic manner.

TABLE 18.1 Religions mentioned in *Efendi 1*

Religious group	Frequency of mention
Jewish	378
Dönme	187
Muslim	104
Christian	1

While doing so, Yalçın negates the differences between Dönmes and Jews and frames them as a power-block. The book echoes conspiracy theories about Jews, although it is directed at Dönmes. The frequency of mentions of religious identity in *Efendi 1* suggests a similar pattern (see Table 18.1). Mentions of Jews are twice as frequent as references to Dönmes. One could infer that while the author aims to investigate the role of Dönmes in Turkish history, he talks more about Jews. Nevertheless, Yalçın does not claim that all Dönmes are immoral but repeats that they are most often powerful people and only a few of them really work for the country.

Efendi 2 also frames Turkish politics as being under the influence of Jewish/Dönme conspiracies. As mentioned, Yalçın argues that many Islamic sects as well as liberal political parties were secretly led by Dönmes. In effect, he extends the conspiratorial frame on Dönmes to a left-wing secular perspective. By "frame extension" (Benford and Snow 2000), it is meant that the author not only reproduces the conspiratorial rhetoric but also extends it beyond the right-wing focus and includes issues relevant to his left-wing secular stance. In so doing, he broadens the ideological grounds of the conspiracy theories about Dönmes, which have historically been propagated by the right wing. This frame extension might have contributed to an increased prevalence of anti-Semitic conspiratorial rhetoric in Turkish society, and also accounts for the popularity of the *Efendi* series, since the conspiratorial frame became appealing to a broader segment of the political spectrum in Turkey.

To begin with, Yalçın (2006: 30) defines himself as a left-wing author. Accordingly, he talks favourably of the policies of the one party period in Turkey in which the strong centre-left government of CHP was in power (381, 383). In addition, he casts foreign states as agents of capitalism, claiming that the United States and Jews have always been intervening in Turkish politics (357). For example, he accuses the USA of sponsoring a capitalism-friendly Islam in Turkey (77, 127, 128, 428). He links the Dönme community to this conspiracy

TABLE 18.2 Religions mentioned in *Efendi 2*

Religious group	Frequency of mention
Jewish	633
Dönme	462
Muslim	285
Christian	0

by suggesting that Dönmes helped to ban the Turkish azan (call to prayer) and brought back the Arabic version (2004: 383). For Yalçın, the Turkish azan benefited the public by helping people to understand the religious texts. However, since this did not properly serve the interests of foreign states and Dönmes, it had to be discouraged. Furthermore, he continues to conflate Jews with Dönmes and effectively presents them as a unified power bloc. Continuing the trend from *Efendi 1*, Jews are mentioned more often than Dönmes (Table 18.2).

In parallel, Yalçın (2006: 145) blames Dönmes for misrepresenting historical accounts to create a dislike of Arabs. In Turkish school history books, Arabs are generally presented as traitors to the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Yalçın rejects this and believes that Dönmes created these myths to generate an antipathy towards Arabs in order to alienate Turkish people from their neighbours and religious companions. This is given as an illustration of the "divide and rule" strategy of Dönmes, who also do not allow anyone to research their community. Yalçın (2006: 51) protests: "we have to accept that there is a 'Dönme history writing' in Turkey. We have to change it!" He accuses the same Dönme-Jewish network for not starting onomastics, the study of origins and use of names, at Turkish universities (2006: 434). In so doing, they make sure that researchers would not be able to trace Dönmes lineages by using onomastics.

Similar to *Efendi 1*, the second book also alleges that many prominent members of Turkish society are of Dönme origin. For example, Yalçın (2006: 422) suspects that the owners of the multi-national corporation Ülker, known as conservative Muslims, could be Dönmes. He notes that the company's success in the international market could be due to its strong ties with the international Jewish community, as "the trade is in the genes of the Ülker brothers" (2006: 423). According to Yalçın, some members of the Justice and Progress Party (AKP), such as Bülent Arınç and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, could be Dönmes (2006: 358), expressing his suspicion about the incumbent president Erdoğan as follows:

> the journalist Ali Kırca interviewed Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Right next to the sofa the Prime Minister was sitting on … there was a seven-branch

> candlestick (menorah) of Jews. Who put that sacred seven-branch candlestick of the Jews there, and why? It cannot just be a setting, there has to be a reason.
>
> YALÇIN 2006: 329

All in all, the *Efendi* series takes as their premise the idea that the Turkish public is unaware of the Dönmes' real power. They echo classical right-wing conspiratorial accounts, which propose that the modernisation movement of the CUP was controlled by Jews and Dönmes. They depict a hierarchical structure in Turkish society in which Dönmes constitute a hidden elite network. This structure dates back to the origins of the Turkish republic, as founding fathers of modern Turkey are argued to be Dönmes. Yalçın attributes many crises in Turkish politics, such as the Cyprus problem, to the secret plots of this group. Dönmes are held responsible for establishing the republic and ruling it unjustly. These claims are traditionally voiced by the marginal right, conservative circles, and Islamist groups in Turkey. Yalçın's works transform this right-wing conspiratorial frame to a left-wing one by not stressing the *de jure* ethnic, religious characteristics of the Dönme community, but their *de facto* political influence. This presents a qualitative difference between the left-wing and right-wing conspiracy theories.

4.3 *Responses to the* Efendi *Series*

The books' success helped popularise a conspiratorial perspective on Dönmes. After *Efendi 2*, a few books that further elaborate the series' claims on the alleged Jewish origins of the leaders of AKP were published: for example, *Musa'nın Çocukları Tayyip ve Emine* (The Children of Moses: Tayyip and Emine) (Poyraz 2007). In some of these books, the current speaker of the Turkish parliament, Bülent Arınç, the former president Abdullah Gül, and the current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his wife, are claimed to have Jewish origins. Two novels, one ridiculing the Dönme conspiracy theories (Erdem 2004) and the other having a Dönme protagonist (Gelardin 2006), were also published. As seen in the *Efendi* case, the subject proved to sell in the Turkish book market.

While some of the criticisms of *Efendi 1* were from secular and Kemalist columnists of the period (for example Gürkan 2004; Kandıtan 2004; Mengi 2004), the praises came from Islamists (for example, Ilgaz 2004), because the book claims a conspiracy behind the origins of modern Turkey and the secular republican regime. In other words, the columnists took sides in line with their ideological stance towards the republican regime. As Bali (2008) also mentions, most of the criticisms defended Mustafa Kemal Atatürk against *Efendi 1*'s argument that the origins of modern Turkey are actually Jewish. They warned

that the discussions on Dönmes targeted the legacy of Atatürk (Bulut 2004, 2007; Çiçek and Erkin 2004). The nationalist right wing kept its distance from the topic and the leftist author by not commenting on the books. Various liberal authors and academics pointed to the methodological problems of the books (Başar 2004; Cündioğlu 2004 ; Kamış 2004; Su 2004) and underlined their anti-Semitic content (Alpay 2005; Mert 2004; Şahin 2004; Polat 2004; Uluengin 2004). Hakan (2004) stated that Dönmes' identity was their personal business, and no one should create anxieties about the community. However, the book was praised by various newspaper columnists of mainstream newspapers for unveiling of an important but undervalued topic (Çölaşan 2004; Özdemir 2004). *Efendi 1* was discussed in the television programmes *Basın Toplantısı*, *Komplo Teorileri*, and *Açık Açık* (Bali 2008: 216). In most of these programmes, conspiracy theories were generally praised for providing new perspectives.

Efendi 2 also earned tributes from some of Yalçın's colleagues in the media (Apaçe 2006; Eğin 2006; İnce 2006; Kömürcü 2006). They claimed that the book was interesting research, which scandalised the perception of politics. The Islamists drastically changed their sympathetic approach towards the series, since *Efendi 2* is about the penetration of Dönmes into Islamic sects. Thus, the Islamist media predominantly criticised the series (Demirci 2006; Kekeç 2006; Kıvanç 2006; Salihoğlu 2006; Yılmazer 2006). Akyüz (2006) stated that although Soner Yalçın was a good researcher, he went too far in promoting conspiracies in *Efendi 2*. Saruhan (2006) noted that the theories about the Dönme ancestry went too far by wrongly presenting many Islamists as Dönmes and thereby lost their credibility. . Moreover, the leader of the Gülen movement, Fethullah Gülen, sued Yalçın for giving wrong information about him (Gezici 2006: 21). Binark (2007) wrote a book to refute Yalçın's accusations on the Rıfai sect. It was also claimed that the *Efendi* series was plagiarised from the Internet (Gezici 2006; Karasu 2006).

The positive reactions to the *Efendi* series focused on the importance of the subject and praised Yalçın for daring to talk about such a taboo. The criticisms mainly highlighted the weaknesses of Yalçın's research and its anti-Semitic messages; a few also proposed conspiracy theories about the book and Yalçın. Overall, the discussion on the series involved secularists, liberals, far-rightists and Islamic groups to different extents. All framed the Dönme theories according to their ideological perspectives. Thus, Bali (2008) suggests that these discussions on the books routinised the anti-Semitic theme about hidden Jewish control in Turkish politics. It is particularly important to note the change in the general tone of the Islamist press. *Efendi 1* was praised, as it repeats the Islamists' phobia of the secret Dönme domination. However, as *Efendi 2* shows

some Islamic sects under the control of Dönmes, the Islamist circles mainly criticised it. In other words, the left-wing conspiratorial accounts remain detached from the right-wing theories. This shows how conspiratorial accounts could be used pragmatically by different political groups in different ways, as they did not engage in conspiracism but just used conspiratorial frames to affirm their beliefs. It should be noted that *Efendi 2* was less popular than *Efendi 1*, as it did not create a comparable media reaction.

5 Conclusion

The analysis illustrates three important points regarding the conspiracy theories about Dönmes. First, the books depict a Dönme conspiracy as a part of a global Jewish conspiracy, and describe Dönmes as local agents of a secret global network. While doing so, Yalçın not only draws back to the Islamist conspiracy account about the Dönme and the CUP, but also expands the historical reach of the conspiratorial rhetoric back to the seventeenth century Ottoman period. Second, the *Efendi* series transformed a right-wing conspiracy account to a left-wing one by presenting liberals, capitalism, and some Islamic sects in association with the alleged Dönme power. The book series pointed at right-wing political actors and religious groups as collaborators in the conspiracies of the Dönme community. This emphasises that the conspiratorial accounts are in line with the political perspective and the interests of the author. The reception of the book in the mainstream media was also shaped by the political stances of the journalists. Third, as Yalçın extends the use of the Islamic right-wing classical conspiracy theory on the origins of the Turkish republic to a more leftist stance, he helped to popularise the conspiracy theories on Dönmes. In parallel, *Efendi 1* was appreciated by the Islamists in Turkey, whereas they criticised *Efendi 2*, because it claimed a secret penetration of Dönmes into Islamic sects. These show that conspiracy theories are political frames that could be used and transformed by various actors in different periods in line with their political views and interests.

This conclusion is in line with my previous findings on the topic, which found that political views shape the ways these accounts are created and disseminated (Nefes 2012). In addition, I conducted interviews with the readers and authors of the conspiracy theories as well as political party representatives, which also illustrated that political stances determine the ways in which these accounts are framed (Nefes 2013, 2015a, 2015b). This implies that scholarship should account for the political agency and interests of the conspiracy theorist.

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CHAPTER 19

The Third Rome Against the Third Temple: Apocalypticism and Conspiracism in Post-Soviet Russia

Michael Hagemeister

1 Introduction: Apocalypticism and Conspiracism

The view of history as a transcendent or immanent history of passion and salvation is based on the assumption that the historical process has a purpose towards which it is driven by the permanent struggle between two irreconcilable forces—that of good and that of evil—and that historical events acquire their significance only through a pre-determined end, *sub specie finis*.[1]

In the Christian interpretation, the historical process is a meaningful unity insofar as it is grounded in God's plan ('Providence'), which is revealed to the believers at its beginning (Creation/Fall) and at its end (Doomsday), as well as through key stages (the redemptive death of Jesus Christ). The *télos* of history—at the same time its end and its goal, which is constructive of its meaning—is revealed in apocalyptic texts. Thus, for example, the Book of Revelation describes the events at the end of time, the fight between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, the deception or seduction by the Evil One(s), the decisive battle and the Last Judgement, the demise of the old world torn apart by conflicts and the beginning of a new, perfect, and atemporal one.

Dualism and determinism are also crucial markers of the myth of a world conspiracy. This myth, too, is based on the belief that the course of history is predetermined and that it is advancing towards a final goal, but in this case, both the course and the final goal are defined by conspirators who are presented as omnipotent global agents, their aim being an (unlimited) rule over all of humanity. While the end of history expected by Christians has, of course, been decided upon, and is not subject to human intervention, there is still a chance that the goal pursued by the mysterious string pullers of this world can be averted, if those who have been warned put up proper resistance.

Just like apocalyptic narratives, the conspiracy myth also promises access to a reality that is essentially hidden. But it is exactly there, in the realm of the

1 This chapter is a further development of Hagemeister (2011).

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clandestine, that the decisive events take place, the struggle of the opposites, which drive history forward and towards its end. What has been given to us as reality is but a deceptive apparition; that which really matters is happening in secret, in a domain that is inaccessible to the average person. Only the initiated and those able to interpret the signs can lift the curtain and reach the truth. Even the crudest conspiracy theory claims to reveal this 'higher' reality, allowing one to look behind the scenes at the 'hidden hand' that is pulling the strings on the stage of history.

Like other 'grand narratives', apocalyptic and conspiracy narratives satisfy the need for an all-embracing interpretation of history and create meaning in an increasingly secular, disenchanted world. Besides, they offer a user manual: friend and foe are clearly distinguishable; the foe is demonised and fought against; the virtuous close ranks. They provide consolation by demonstrating that the time of suffering is limited and that the reign of evil will (or can) be overcome.

In Russia the eschatological conception of history has a long tradition. Lotman and Uspenskij (1984) even identified it as one of the markers of Russian culture. The philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) called the Russian people "in accordance with their metaphysical nature and vocation in the world a people of the End" and thought the apocalyptic vision a fundamental national feature (Berdyaev 1947: 193).[2] Every so often, the collective imagination would become inflamed in a mixture of terror and hope, as revelations and prophecies were made about the end of history and the figure of the Antichrist, the "deceiver" and "the ruler of this world," as well as about the messianic role of Russia in the plan of the Christian salvation history (Clay 1998; Bethea 1989; Billington 1966: 504–518).

The highest point of eschatological tension in modern Russia was the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as radical political, economic, and social changes—the results of an accelerated industrialisation, urbanisation, and secularisation—shook the country. These events were often interpreted with the help of religious categories: as a foreboding of an imminent eschatological catastrophe and as evidence of the hidden destructive work of the Antichrist and his allies. Doomsday scenarios and the fear of revolution

2 Berdyaev's own interpretation of history is also eschatological. For him, the question concerning the meaning of history can only be answered from a final point: "How is it possible to understand the meaning of history without knowing what the last stage of history will be like? … It is evident that a philosophy of history cannot be scientific; it can only be prophetic. It postulates the vision of a light that streams from the future; and it is only this light that proclaims a meaning for history. History has a meaning only if it is going to come to an end" (Berdyaev 1949: 168–169).

received special treatment in the subculture of Russian 'Judeophobia'.[3] The premodern or antimodern consciousness saw Jews and Masons—sponsors and beneficiaries of progress and enlightenment—as the henchmen of the Antichrist; indeed, they were often identified with him.

Even today, after the failure of secular belief in progress with its promise of a 'radiant future' or 'paradise on earth', and with its gigantic toll of sacrifices, there is a tendency to elevate the great catastrophes that Russia went through in the twentieth century, as well as present-day crises and conflicts, to the level of salvation history and thus fill them with meaning. Much research has been done on the enormous significance of the 'apocalyptic matrix' for post-Soviet Russia's conception of itself (Akhmetova 2005, 2010; Bagdasarian 2006; Beglov 2014; Bessonov 2014; Levkievskaia 2005; Mitrokhin 2007; Shnirel′man 2017). However, the connection between apocalyptic and conspiratorial ideas is yet to be more closely examined.

2 Sergei Nilus and the Apocalyptical Reading of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*

The present-day evocations of the hidden activities of the Antichrist and his agents can rely on a broad range of prophecies and their theological, philosophical, as well as folkloristic, literary, and political interpretations. There is, however, one text that has been the default source of reference for conspiracy theorists, and not only in Russia: the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

First published in Russia in 1903, the *Protocols* is an anonymous work that is still used today by anti-Semites across the globe to accuse the Jews of conspiring in a sinister quest for world domination. The text purports to be the literal transcript of one or several speeches given by an anonymous Jew at a meeting of undefined people (presumably Jews) at an undisclosed location, at an unknown point in time. The speaker outlines in great detail the secret methods and goals of a century-old Judeo-Masonic conspiracy against the entire non-Jewish world. The aim of the Jewish conspirators, who see themselves as 'benefactors' bringing eternal peace and order to the world, is the establishment—in the guise of legality—of a perfectly organised patriarchal

3 I would like to distinguish between premodern religious/cultural Judeophobia (or anti-Judaism), which can be avoided by the transforming effect of the sacrament of baptism, and modern secular racist/biologistic anti-Semitism, which in Russia was slow in coming and never became a dominant force. In this latter case, conversion is not a solution: the evil has to be eradicated.

dictatorship with a king from the House of David at its helm. This world leader is described as a charismatic father-figure, a model of virtue, self-command, and reason. Admired by the masses (both Jews and non-Jews), he is almost idolised. A benevolent despot, the Jewish king will rule over a harmonious albeit dystopian world in which the vast majority of people, being relieved of the burden of freedom, live in dull happiness and quiet.[4] The text of the *Protocols*, based largely on a compilation of literary materials from the second half of the nineteenth century, was in all likelihood written at the beginning of the twentieth century (De Michelis 2004). From the outset, it was presented as a genuine document, often accompanied by elaborate explanations as to how it fell into the hands of the publisher. Despite the most intensive research, the details of its origins still defy clarification. In particular, the question of its authorship still remains open (Hagemeister 2008; Levy 2014).

Of all publishers and commentators of the *Protocols*, Sergei Nilus (1862–1929) is still considered most influential. Nilus was an apocalyptic thinker and prolific religious writer who included the *Protocols* in his devotional book *The Great in the Small and the Antichrist as an Imminent Political Possibility: Notes of an Orthodox Believer* (1905). As a nobleman and (unsuccessful) landowner, he belonged to those victims of rapid modernisation and secularisation who identified the downfall of their own world with the end of the world in general. In his commentary, Nilus interpreted the *Protocols* within the framework of his apocalyptic worldview as a revelatory unveiling of the hidden strategy of the Satanic forces of darkness and their worldly allies—Jews and Masons—in their unremitting struggle against the divine forces of light (embodied in the Russian Orthodox Church), a struggle which seemed to have entered its final stage at the turn to the twentieth century (Hagemeister 2012).

Nilus seems to have been favourably impressed by Vladimir Solov′ev's (1853–1900) famous *Short Tale of the Antichrist*, first published in 1900. With his vision of the Antichrist as "the coming man" Solov′ev, in his own words, wanted "to reveal in advance the deceptive mask behind which the abyss of evil is hiding" (1914: 91). His declared goal was to warn people of the growing covert and seductive power of evil in history and to call for a fight against it. In Nilus's understanding, Solov′ev depicted the Antichrist as a charismatic "superman" and "benefactor," who gains world power with the help of the "mighty brotherhood of the Freemasons" (203) and the *Comité permanent universel* (which in a Judeophobic reading would stand for the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*), and builds his earthly reign on the promise of universal "peace and security" (1 *Thess* 5:3).

4 There is a vast literature on the *Protocols*. Classic studies are Rollin (1939), and Cohn (1967). The most important recent studies are Skuratovskii (2001), Taguieff (2004), and De Michelis (2004).

This was a visionary revelation of the Satanic "Judeo-Masonic world conspiracy" and its goal, the foundation of a Jewish world kingdom as a diabolical perversion of the Kingdom of God. Nilus interpreted Solov′ev's early and sudden death merely five months after the publication of his *Short Tale of the Antichrist* in a manner similar to Solov′ev's own premonitions: the revenge of that same dark and sinister force whose secret plans he had exposed in his tale (Nilus 1905: 317–318). However, the actual 'proof' of the accuracy of Solov′ev's prophecy was, for Nilus, to be found in the *Protocols* (Nilus 1905: 316–319, 321–322).[5]

Nilus shared the traditional views of Christian anti-Judaism, according to which the Jews, who refuse to recognise the Messiah in Jesus, have to play a central, predetermined role in the cosmic drama of Passion and Salvation, namely as path-breakers and agents of the Antichrist who compete with God for rule over the world. Nilus perceived a tragic dimension to this negative role that the Jews had thrust upon them. He believed that their fateful part had to be played out according to the pre-ordained divine plan until the end of history. At the end of the world—after a brief reign of the Antichrist—the Jews (or the better part of them) will inevitably recognise and repent of their apostasy and turn to Jesus, the true Messiah, at which time "all Israel will be saved," according to Paul's letter to the Romans (*Rom* 11:26). For Nilus, as for many other Russian religious thinkers, the 'final resolution' of the 'Jewish question' lay in *conversion*, that is, the elimination of Judaism, rather than of Jews (compare Rossman 2002: 211–220). Nilus expressly appealed to his readers not to harbour enmity towards the Jews who were, after all, simply blind and misguided by their leaders (1905: 323).

In January 1917, a few weeks before the fall of monarchy in Russia, Nilus published the last edition of his book, this time under the dramatic title *"It Is Near, Even at the Doors": Concerning That Which People Do Not Wish to Believe and Which Is So Near* (1917). Nilus regarded the Bolshevik Revolution, which appeared to support the plan of the "Elders of Zion," as an eschatological catastrophe and the beginning of the reign of the Antichrist, who instead of the Heavenly Jerusalem promised paradise on Earth.

Following the end of the Soviet Union, Nilus and his writings have been rediscovered in Russia (Hagemeister 2006). Nilus has become virtually a cult figure among Orthodox fundamentalists and nationalists. His books—especially those that contain the *Protocols*—are regularly republished, often under the benediction of local Orthodox Church authorities, and can be found

5 For the remarkable parallels between the content of Solov′ev's *Short Tale of the Antichrist* and the *Protocols*, see Hagemeister (2000; 2010).

in church bookshops in even the most distant provinces (Shnirel′man 2017: 145–152). In addition, congresses and annual 'Nilus Readings' are held on the anniversary of his death, where self-appointed experts on 'Masonology' (*masonovedenie*), 'Judeology' (*evreevedenie*), and 'Conspirology' (*konspirologiia*) gather. In this milieu, strongly influenced by the religious imagination, the *Protocols* are—quite as Nilus intended—read and understood as an apocalyptic text exposing the hidden machinations of "the talmudic Jewry of the world in the preparation for and establishment of the global reign of the Antichrist" (Shchedrin 2002: 25).

This incorporates the *Protocols* into a long tradition of apocalyptic writings, of which many, like the *Protocols* themselves, are apocryphal. Examples of this genre include the *Vision of Father John of Kronstadt*, a bloodthirsty apocalypse contrived in the early 1920s as anti-Bolshevik propaganda and attributed to the famous miracle worker and clairvoyant of Kronstadt (1829–1909),[6] or the anti-Jewish and anti-Mason prophecies of Saint Serafim of Sarov (1754–1833), composed probably in the second half of the nineteenth century by Russian reactionaries and now widely distributed under the title *The Antichrist and Russia* (Hagemeister 2010).

3 A Historiosophic Interpretation of Russian History

In post-Soviet Russia, 'historiosophy' (*istoriosofiia*) and 'metahistory' (*metaistoriia*) are popular buzz words referring to attempts to speculatively determine the goal and meaning of the process of world history, the forces and laws that define it, as well as to evaluate all of these as constructive or destructive, propitious or ominous.[7] To this end, the nineteenth and twentieth century Russian traditions of the metaphysics of history and historical theology (where history appears as a revelation of God's design), as well as the dualistic-deterministic vision of history according to Soviet ideology (history as a revelation of 'the universal laws of social development') are taken up and popularised. After all, in its eschatology and demonology, Marxism was no stranger to a

6 http://www.orthodox.net/articles/vision-of-st-john-of-kronstadt.html. Accessed 28/11/2015.

7 The concept of 'historiosophy' comes from August Cieszkowski (1814–1894), one of the founders of Polish messianism, who outlined an active teleology of history in his *Prolegomena to a Historiosophy* (1838). While in the West the word 'metahistory', since the publication of Hayden White's eponymous book in 1973, has been taken to mean that writing a history is essentially a poetic act, in Russia the term has a completely different meaning. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century the religious philosopher Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) used it to designate "the object of the Apocalypse," namely the hidden "noumenal side of that universal process, the other aspect of which reveals itself to us as history" (1911: 103).

version of history that had an end goal (the 'realm of freedom'), the "inner, hidden laws" and "real ultimate driving forces" (Engels 1888: 52, 54) of which disclose themselves only to progressive consciousness. A classic historiosophic interpretation of history that remains in print is the "philosophical poetry" written later in life by Vladimir Solov′ev. His descriptions of the rise, reign, and fall of the Antichrist had and still have an enormous impact on many Russian intellectuals; they are read and reread even today not as literary fiction, but as a concrete prophecy, which is interpreted with reference to the present day and the near future (Hagemeister 2010: 261). Other influential sources include the eschatological treatises and "fantasies" of Lev Tikhomirov (1852–1923) (1999, 2004), a former terrorist turned ultraorthodox monarchist, as well as the Manichean versions of history developed by the religious philosophers Father Pavel Florenskii (1882–1937) and Aleksei Losev (1893–1988).

Florenskii and Losev, who are among the most prominent figures in Russian metaphysical thought, see the history of humanity in an eschatological perspective as a battlefield with two opposite cosmic principles fighting each other: Logos and Chaos, Transcendence and Immanence or, theologically speaking, Christ and the Antichrist. In 1929, Losev wrote an interpretation of world history at the core of which was the myth of a Judeo-Satanic conspiracy. According to this vision of history, the historical agent of the Antichrist is the Jews. Rootless, materialistic, rationalistic, and preoccupied with earthly matters, they lead people astray with their claims to self-salvation and self-deification. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, humanism, and liberalism as well as "the Leviathan of capitalism and socialism" (Anon. 1996: 127) mark the stages of their secret destructive deeds through history, culminating in Marxism and communism as the most complete expression of the kabbalistic, talmudic, Satanical spirit of Judaism: "Judaism with all its dialectical and historical consequences is Satanism, the stronghold of global Satanism" (122). The same year in which he wrote these lines, Losev secretly took monastic oaths and became monk Andronik. Decorated with insignia and honours of the Soviet state, he died in 1988 in Moscow.

Seen from a historiosophic or metahistorical perspective, the history of Russia, too, appears to be a field where an 'invisible battle' (*nezrimaia bitva*) is raging between the forces of light and those of darkness. In this interpretation, historical events are understood as an analogy to Christ's passion on the Way of the Cross,[8] as an extended act of crucifixion performed by the forces of the

8 Usually the following periods and events are mentioned as stations of Russia's Way of the Cross: the "Tatar yoke" when Russia drew the enemies of Christianity to itself and through its sacrifice, saved the Western civilisation; the invasion of the Latin West in the early seventeenth century (the "Polish yoke") and finally, "the catastrophe of 1917."

Antichrist, and as a sacrifice—which the period of Soviet rule is frequently associated with (Rossman 2002: 223–225). According to the proponents of 'the sacral metahistory', Russia is presently lying in a grave, unconscious, but a miraculous resurrection will not be long in coming (Bagdasarian 2006: 436–437). In the period of prosperity that will then begin, the last period of world history before the Last Judgement, the reborn Russia under the guidance of 'the Emperor of the Last Days' will free humanity of the power of evil. Thus, Russia sacrifices itself in order to triumph in the end.

This vision of Russia's decisive role in the drama of salvation history is supported by the doctrine of Moscow as 'the Third Rome', which comes from the famous formula of the Pskov monk Filofei, who wrote in the first half of the sixteenth century: "For two Romes have fallen, and the Third stands, and a fourth shall never be" (Duncan 2000: 11). After the 'break' from Rome (the East-West Schism of 1054) and the 'betrayal' of Constantinople (at the heretical Council of Florence in 1439), Russia becomes the last kingdom of true believers. The end of this kingdom will also mean the end of history, with the coming of the Antichrist, the Second Coming of Christ, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Until that time, Holy Russia and its rulers remain chosen by God, destined to ward off the adversary of Christ and withhold the end of the world (Nazarov 2005: 914–955).[9]

In this ethnotheological narrative, the Russian tsar acts as the *katechon*, that blocking, restraining force to which Paul refers in his Second Epistle to the Thessalonians: "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only the one who now restrains it [*ho katéchōn*] will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed" (2 *Thess* 2:7–8).[10] Nicholas II's abdication in March 1917, forced upon him through "a cowardly betrayal," and his murder in July 1918 were then understood as the realisation of that very prophecy, that is, as a removal of the *katechon*, so that the way be free for the reign of the Antichrist (Levkievskaia 2005: 184). The regicide—the second worst crime

9 According to the so-called doctrine of substitution, after the 'betrayal' of Israel, her chosenness and her messianic mission were passed on to Holy Russia and her 'God-bearing people'; the Orthodox Church became the 'New Israel'; its holy sites the 'New (or Second) Jerusalem'. When Paul declared that in the end "all Israel will be saved" (*Rom* 11:26), he had in mind the Orthodox Church of Jesus Christ to which the Jews will have to convert (Nazarov 2005: 933–934, 945).

10 In Russian, the role of the 'autocrat' (*samoderzhets*) as the *katechon* (*uderzhivaiushchii*) is apparent on the etymological level also; Russ. *derzhat'* corresponds to the Greek *katéchein*. Just like the Antichrist and his agents, the mysterious figure of the *katechon* (in Paul's epistle the word is first neuter and then masculine), which delays the Last Judgement and the coming of the Kingdom of God, has always lent itself to associations with ever changing images, groups or political powers.

after deicide—was an 'apocalyptic crime' planned over a long time and executed by the agents of the Antichrist (the Jews) according to a "kabbalistic and masonic ritual"—by cutting off the head and having it preserved.[11] The apostle-like ruler of the Third Rome, chosen and anointed by God and holder of "the katechonic Orthodox power," is "objectively the greatest metaphysical foe of Antichrist's Jewish agents," and his elimination was an act "of supreme metaphysical and religious significance", according to the historian Mikhail Nazarov (2005: 213–223).

However, many believers are convinced that the place of the *katechon* is not vacant, but occupied by the Mother of God. As a proof they cite the miraculous discovery of an icon in the village of Kolomenskoe, near Moscow, on March 2, 1917, the day of Nicholas II's abdication. The icon depicts the seated Queen of Heaven with the symbols of her earthly rule, in imperial purple, with crown, sceptre, and orb. The icon, named 'She Who Reigns' (*Derzhavnaia*), immediately had miraculous properties attributed to it, and began to attract numerous pilgrims. Copies of it were circulated widely; the image was worshipped in all parts of the country. Even today, it is seen by many as a sign that the protection of Russia from the assault of the Antichrist has been passed from the tsar to the Mother of God, and that she will retain the autocratic power until the restoration of the monarchy (Nazarov 2005: 950; Bagdasarian 2006: 441–442).

The murder of the Tsar and his family is considered to be the central event of Russia's twentieth-century history. All the misfortunes and suffering that came later—the persecution of Christians, the famine, the terror, the deaths of millions of people, and finally, the Great Patriotic War—are perceived as divine punishment for the declension of the Russian people from faith and the Judas-like betrayal of their ruler. Just as Jesus surrendered himself to the will of his Heavenly Father and died on Golgotha for the sins of the world, so did the 'martyr-tsar' give his life as an expiatory sacrifice for the sins of Russia in Yekaterinburg (the Russian Golgotha).[12] Only when the Russian people have cleaned their land of idols and symbols of godlessness; only when they have renounced

11 See Platonov (2001): 296–324; Fomin (2002b); Mul'tatuli (2010): 412–579. For a critical analysis see: Rossman (2002): 231–235; Slater (2007): 71–78; Shnirel'man (2017). Orthodox nationalists and some Church officials also demanded to have Nicholas II and his family canonised as "martyred by the Jews." The demand, however, was declined by the leading officials of the Moscow Patriarchate (Khizhii 2014).

12 Fomin (2006): 351. Already in the early antibolshevik-anti-Semitic polemic, the fate of the last tsar was compared to, or equated with, the Passion of Christ (Vinberg (1922); Khizhii (2014)). Illustrative examples from a more recent time include the patriotic songs of the well-known singer Zhanna Bichevskaia (b. 1944) or the films *The Atonement* (1992; dir. Anatolii Ivanov) and *The Russian Golgotha* (2000; dir. Viktor Ryzhko).

the ideas of democracy and political equality; only when they have repented of their collective guilt and atoned for "the most horrible and fatal crime of the twentieth century"; only then will the tsar come back and Russia will regain its erstwhile glory (Levkievskaia 2005: 183–191; Akhmetova 2010: 245–260; Khizhii 2014). Admittedly, there is some risk that instead of the Anointed One it will be the 'Counter-Anointed' (*antí-christos*) who will take possession of the Russian throne. In this case, it would be 'the King of Israel', as the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew words *ha-melek le-Israel* is the number of the second Beast of the Apocalypse (Molchanov 1990: 25).[13]

One of the most vehement and influential propagandists of the self-victimisation and self-charismatisation of Russia in the first post-Soviet years was the Metropolitan Ioann (Ivan Snychev, 1927–1995) of St. Petersburg, member of the Holy Synod, and the third-highest church official of Russia. In countless articles, pamphlets, and interviews, Ioann evoked the mission of the Third Rome in the salvation history of the world, as "the last stronghold of true faith" in the struggle against the global conspiracy of the anti-Christian forces (Rossman 2002: 221–225). For the Metropolitan, the apocalyptic enemies of Christianity were first of all the "lawless people"—that is, the Jews—harbouring a plan for the realisation of their "centuries-old dream of world supremacy" (Ioann 1993a). Their allies are "the global powers behind the scenes," international Freemasonry, the "transnational financial oligarchy," the supporters of Zionism and Marxism, as well as Israel, the USA, and their Western European satellites. Reborn in the spirit of Orthodoxy, Russia could resist these evil forces and their doctrines of materialism, liberalism, and democracy, Holy Russia being the earthly pedestal of the Godly Throne, opposite which stands the "Third Temple," the throne of the Antichrist (Ioann 1994).

The task of educating the Russian public about the machinations of "the forces of global evil" has been continued by the Institute for Russian Civilisation, founded in Moscow with Ioann's blessing. The Institute's director, amateur historian Oleg Platonov (b. 1950), has become one of the most prolific and influential anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic authors in post-Soviet Russia. In his book series *Russia's Crown of Thorns,* he presents 'documents' that should provide evidence for the "secret war" against Orthodox Russia. Just like Ioann, Platonov also sees the plan for establishing the rule of the Jewish Antichrist

13 In the time of Peter the Great, there were rumours of the real Tsar having been exchanged for a Jew from the tribe of Dan, which made Peter into a "Jewish tsar anointed by the devil." For the Russian Old Believers who saw that the last kingdom of true faith, the Third Rome, had collapsed, as well as for numerous sectarians, the autocracy and the succession of monarchs were an embodiment of the Antichrist. For more on the demonic conception of Russian rulers, see Platt (2000).

laid out in the *Protocols*, the truth having been revealed to the Russian people by the Grace of God (Platonov 2012).

4 "The Signs of the Times"

With the beginning of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, that is, with the end of state censorship and state monopoly on information and eventually the collapse of the Soviet Empire, Russian citizens suddenly found themselves overwhelmed by a flood of differing and conflicting political and commercial information. In the 1990s, as free-market reforms and economic shock therapy threw major parts of the population into poverty and ethnic conflicts flared up along the state borders, people were looking for simple and simplifying explanations that also corresponded to familiar (ideological) patterns of thought. Many substituted Church doctrine for the old Soviet ideology, which like some incarnations of Orthodoxy, drew much of its strength from the idea that Russia was surrounded by hostile, alien forces. This was the moment of *les terribles simplificateurs* and their apocalyptic and conspiracist scenarios.

A veritable torrent of writings—including reprints of pre-revolutionary publications—swept over Russia, in which the secret activities of dark supernatural forces and their earthly allies (Jews, Masons, Zionists, Mondialists, and many others) were 'revealed' and identified. The concoctions bore titles such as *Invisible Empires*, *Secret Forces*, *The Ideology of the "Mystery of Lawlessness," The Antichrist in Moscow*, *The War Against the Antichrist*, *Attention: The Seal of the Antichrist!*, *The Russian Apocalypse and the End of History* or simply *Conspiracy Against Russia*. Using a range of sources, not least those of the Russian Old Believers (*starovery*) and sectarians, these texts revived and updated centuries-old eschatological, demonological, and anti-Jewish representations of the Antichrist, who would be a Jew from the tribe of Dan and become the false Messiah of the Jews; they also talked of the "seal of the Antichrist" and the "number of the Beast."

The readers of these texts learnt that the Antichrist was born in Israel in 1962 and made his appearance in 1992 (Akhmetova 2005: 231, Bagdasarian 2006: 436).[14] For this purpose, the members of the Jewish tribe of Dan were brought from Ethiopia to Israel (Nazarov 2005: 919). Organ transplantation,

14 The birth date of the Antichrist, which was 'calculated' by the famous swindler Léo Taxil over a century ago, can be explained through the magic of numbers: the sum of the digits composing 1962 is 18, thus 6+6+6, the number of the apocalyptic Beast. According to the Old Russian (Byzantine) calendar, 1992 is the year 7500 "since the creation of the world."

genetic engineering, and cloning, conducted by sinister Masonic and Jewish doctors, secretly served to facilitate the artificial conception of the Antichrist (Nazarov 2005: 922; Akhmetova 2008: 14–18; 2010: 61–65). Likewise, the mummification of Lenin's body and its public display as a 'pseudorelic' is denounced as an expression of the cult of the Antichrist, and brought in connection with *Teraphim*, idols, allegedly used by the Israelites in abominable cultic rites. The authors also reveal that the mausoleum on the Red Square was based on the design of the Pergamon Altar, Satan's sacred shrine (Fomin 1993). After the Jews seized Jerusalem, they secretly set up the "Third Temple," the future residence of the Antichrist, on the site of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque (Fomin 2002a; compare 2 *Thess* 2:4).[15]

The belief in the secret undertakings of anti-Christian powers gave rise to a nearly paranoiac obsession with signs. The 'seal of the Antichrist', it is claimed, is either implanted as a microchip into the forehead and the right hand of newborn babies, or else a laser is used to tattoo it under the skin, so that people can be controlled and manipulated all their lives (in Russian *zombirovanie* and *kodirovanie*) through a gigantic super-computer dubbed 'The Beast', allegedly based in Brussels (Akhmetova 2010: 145–148; Bessonov 2014: 244–249; Panchenko 2016). In this magical mindset, the individual taxpayer's number is in fact 'the seal of the Antichrist', which comes to replace one's baptismal name in the "book of life" (*Rev* 20:12), thus robbing its bearers of their Christian identity and making them defenceless in the face of anti-Christian forces, which already control the global computer network (Bagdasarian 2006: 444–449; Mitrokhin 2007: 239–244; Akhmetova 2010: 182–186).[16] For the adherents of these theories, the 'number of the Beast', without which "no man might buy or sell" (*Rev* 13:17), is also recognisable on barcodes and credit cards (Nazarov 2005: 921; Bagdasarian 2006: 443–444; Bessonov 2014: 246). Those willing to see and to listen had it revealed to them by divine grace that even the most mundane concepts and symbols of the present day also carry secret messages of the Antichrist and his allies, Jews and Masons. Thus, the word *president* is translated as 'initiated' (meaning 'into Masonry'); *revolu-tion* (pronounced in Russian as *revoliu-tsiia*) actually means 'Zionist revolt'; *democracy* denotes the power of the demons; and *demonstration* is a procession of demons. In the word *computer* the 'com'

15 Jewish extremists are planning, indeed, to remove the Islamic sacred sites from Haram al-Sharif and to erect the Third Temple in their place; its model is already on display in Jerusalem's Old City (Gorenberg 2002).

16 Already in the mid-seventeenth century eschatologically inclined Old Believers, as well as supporters of apocalyptic sects, refused to accept documents issued by the state (passports, tax reports, edicts) as well as money, claiming that they bore the 'seal of the Antichrist'.

stands for 'communist', and 'ter' for a 'devouring beast' in Ancient Greek (Akhmetova 2008: 10–13).

The striving for a New World Order, a world government, and a global currency, together with the World Wide Web and the heresy of ecumenism, have served the establishment of a uniform world religion and global governance in the form of a totalitarian anti-Christian ideocracy (Gavriushin 1991; Bagdasarian 2006: 437–443). The 'religious occupation' by foreign sects, together with the growing influence of occultism, Satanism, cosmism, theosophy, and New Age movements have been encouraging apostasy, thus bringing the coming of the Antichrist closer (Ioann 1993b; Akhmetova 2010: 188–189). Feminism, homosexuality, and sorcery are also interpreted eschatologically as "signs of the times" (*Matt* 16:3) on a par with the appearance of demonic creatures in the shape of UFOs and aliens, as well as the growth in the number of 'mystical crimes' (*misticheskie prestupleniia*) the latter being a reference to 'ritual murders' of Christians (Akhmetova 2010: 189). Finally, geopolitical and ecological catastrophes also point to the approaching end of time; it suffices to mention the bombing of the Orthodox brotherly nation of Serbia by NATO forces, the American occupation of Iraq (the apocalyptic Babylon, the Antichrist's 'classical' birthplace) or the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, which in Russian means 'wormwood', evoking the falling star in Revelation (*Rev* 8:11) (Bagdasarian 2006: 435–442).

In 1993, the publishing house of the Holy Trinity Lavra in Sergiev Posad, the seat of the Moscow Theological Academy, brought out an anthology of apocalyptic visions and eschatological writings. Entitled *Russia Before the Second Coming* (*of Christ*), the publication included a wide selection of writings, from those authored by church fathers to modern conspiracist texts, including *The Antichrist and Russia* by Serafim of Sarov, *The Vision of Father John of Kronstadt* and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The original print run was 100,000 copies. The anthology, published with a foreword by the abbot Isaia and with the financial support of the International Bank of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, has become a bestseller. As of today, it is available in numerous official reprints and in even more pirated editions, having expanded to two large-format volumes (Fomin and Fomina 1998; Shnirel'man 2017: 152–171). Apparently, the teachings of the secret activities of the Evil One have obscured the 'Good News' of the Gospel.[17]

17 For all that, the enormous popularity of apocalyptic writings is not a specifically Russian phenomenon, as a comparison with the USA shows. With 65 million copies sold and places on the *New York Times* bestseller list, the series of 'Antichrist thrillers' under the

5 Metaphysical Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia: Three Examples

5.1 *Aleksandr Dugin: The Occult "War of the Continents"*

Probably the most comprehensive interpretation of world events according to the scheme of apocalyptic dualism is offered by the self-taught polyglot and well-read 'metaphysician' and geopolitician Aleksandr Dugin (b. 1962), from 2008 to 2014 professor at Moscow State University and director of its Centre for Conservative Studies.[18] Since the early 1990s, Dugin, himself supposedly an adherent of the apocalyptically inspired Old Believers, has been spreading a mixture of eschatology with esotericism and elements of European and Islamic traditionalism (Sedgwick 2004: 221–237) through multiple channels: the radio programme "Finis mundi," the publishing house "Arktogeia," in journals, and websites in various languages, as well as in talk shows and interviews on the state-controlled television. According to Dugin, the history of humanity has been determined by an "occult planetary struggle" of two antagonistic powers, the "great war of the continents": land against sea, Behemoth against Leviathan, the organic "tellurocracies" of the East, which are rooted in their native soil, against the root- and soulless, materialistic "thalassocracies" of the West, that apocalyptic Beast of the Sea (*Rev* 13:1–10).

The USA as the "quintessence of the West" is the empire of the Antichrist, a chimerical, transplanted civilisation devoid of any sacral tradition (its self-elevation to "God's New Israel" and "New Zion"—the Anglo-American interpretation of the doctrine of substitution—is for Dugin an especially perfidious attempt at deception by the "Western Antichrist"). The year of the discovery of America (1492 is the year 7000 in the Old Russian-Byzantine calendar, which corresponds to the seventh and last day of creation) marks the "New World" as belonging to the end of time, as does the "sacral geography," which puts paradise in the East where the sun rises, while hell ("the land of the dead") is in the West where the sun sets (Dugin 1999: 645–670). The katechonic powers of Holy Russia, the Third Rome, have been standing against the Antichrist since time immemorial (378–395, 493–521). In order to continue performing its salvationist historical mission for the benefit of humanity, Russia must create a mighty sacral Eurasian empire as a shield against the common archenemy, the modern secular world and the Western materialist civilisation being the utmost expression of global evil. Russian Old Believers, ultraorthodox Jews, European

general title *Left Behind* (1995–present) is probably the most successful product of modern apocalyptic mass narratives, also in commercial terms (Barkun 2003).

18 For more on Dugin, see the chapter by Victor Shnirelman in the present volume.

traditionalists as well as those Islamic fundamentalists who recognise the USA as *al-dajjâl*, the false messiah and the Antichrist, against whom *al-Mahdî*, the prophesied redeemer, will go on a crusade (Dugin 2005)—all of them will be allies in the apocalyptic "final and conclusive battle" or "Endkampf" (Dugin always writes this last word in German).

5.2 *Arkadii Maler: Russia—The "Northern Katechon"*

Dugin's work, with its provocative mix of esoteric and aggressively anti-Western motives, finds particular resonance among young intellectuals, some of whom have followed in his footsteps. One of them is the self-proclaimed "Orthodox mystic" Arkadii Maler (b. 1979), who is among the leading ideologues of the anti-Western "neo-Byzantine" doctrine.[19] In his book *The Spiritual Mission of the Third Rome,* Maler declares that Russia is "the northern *Katechon*," evoking, like Dugin, Russia's "eschatological mission" to fulfil its "central katechonic role" in the fight against the "New World Order" of "the godless West," with its materialism, liberalism and moral relativism (Maler 2005: 134–136, 170–206; 2007: 110–124).[20] According to Maler, even the Bolsheviks, and in particular Stalin, unconsciously pursued this goal when they made Moscow the capital of the "Red Empire" and declared it to be the "absolute antithesis of the West," the "bearer of the planetary mission of liberating the world from the 'shackles of capitalism'" (Maler 2005: 182–183, 185). The Third Rome was transformed for a while into the Third International, without, however, renouncing its mission as the *katechon*, as the restraining force against the empire of evil. For Maler, the "last stage" in the struggle against the Antichrist will be the "eschatological war of the Third Rome against the Third Carthage," the "Anglo-American Atlantic civilisation" (Maler 2005: 177).

5.3 *Il′ia Glazunov: Painted Apocalypses*

Both the Antichrist and the visible signs of his coming and rule are completely trivialised and turned into an item of spectacular marketing in the painted apocalypses of Il′ia Glazunov (1930–2017), former court painter of the Politburo and one of the most popular artists of post-Soviet Russia.

19 This doctrine acquired popularity primarily through the controversial television documentary *The Fall of an Empire*: *the Lesson of Byzantium* (2008) by Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov), Putin's 'spiritual father'. In the film, the fall of Byzantium exemplifies in an undisguised historical analogy the continuous threat to which the Orthodox world is exposed because of a conspiracy of the Latin West.

20 For the propagation of Russia's katechonic anti-Western mission, Maler founded the club "Katechon" in 1999 at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Since 2005, he has been publishing the almanac *Northern Katechon*.

His paintings on national and religious themes, displayed since 2004 in a special state-sponsored and pompously furnished museum in the centre of Moscow, feature 'dark forces' identifiably associated with modern Western values and with 'Judeo-Masonic Bolshevism', while Holy Russia and her last Emperor appear as victims of their conspiracy (Hagemeister 2004). The monumental, often-reproduced painting *The Great Experiment* (1990)[21] features in its centre the 'Seal of the Antichrist' as the source of all the evil that befell Russia in the twentieth century. The Seal is surrounded by the heads of leading Bolsheviks. Glazunov reproduced this particular detail from the front page of an apocalyptic volume by Sergei Nilus, which contains *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Glazunov himself appears in his own work as an apocalyptic visionary. For example, in his enigmatic *Mystery of the Twentieth Century* (1999)[22] the artist is depicted raising the curtain that is used to disguise reality, thus allowing the observer to look deep into the driving forces of world events. Glazunov also reveals his Manichean conspiracist worldview in his articles and interviews, though nowhere does it come across as clearly as in his autobiography *Russia Crucified* (2004–2008). There, the artist talks of history manipulated by a secret Satanic power, which in its pursuit of world domination makes use of the corroding effects of humanism, liberalism, and democracy, consistently working towards the destruction of Russia and the "genocide of the Russian people."

6 Conclusion

The experience of multiple crises and the fear of catastrophe in post-Soviet Russia have created particularly favourable conditions for interpretations along the lines of salvation history. The 'apocalyptic matrix', with its eschatologically defined figures of saviours and enemies, offers guidance, clear criteria for inclusion and exclusion, and ground for solidarity, all at the same time. The impenetrable patterns of ties and anonymous structures are vividly personified in tangible subjects of redemption and corruption. The 'enemy' are the agents and beneficiaries of Western modernity, behind whom stands the well-disguised seductive Antichrist, to be exposed and vanquished. His antagonist in the cosmic struggle is Holy Russia, the eschatological Third Rome as the *katechon*, chosen and called to oppose the absolute Evil. From this way

21 http://www.glazunov.ru/EN/B_Eksperiment.htm. Accessed 28/11/2015.

22 http://www.glazunov.ru/627a.htm. Accessed 28/11/2015.

of seeing the world arises a sense of mission that makes up for the feeling of powerlessness, compensates for the supposed humiliation, and fills all the suffering and sacrifice with a comprehensive, ultimate meaning.

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CHAPTER 20

Alexander Dugin: Between Eschatology, Esotericism, and Conspiracy Theory

Victor Shnirelman

1 Introduction

Alexander Dugin is a remarkable figure in the dull Russian political scene, and his ideas have already been analysed by a number of scholars. Some have noted his sympathy towards fascism (Luks 2000; Shenfield 2001: 191–194; Mathyl 2003; Umland 2008, 2009, 2010) others emphasise his Eurasian orientation (Bassin 2008), and still others point to his geopolitical ideas (Dunlop 2001; Ingram 2001; Wiederkehr 2004; Parland 2005: 103–116). Some authors, while acknowledging his fascist inclinations, underline Dugin's evident proximity to the European New Right (Shekhovtsov 2009a, 2009b), and some have focused on his esoteric (or traditionalist) interests (Sedgwick 2004: 221–237). Finally, certain scholars have tried to cover all his various concepts in general (Laruelle 2006, 2008: 107–144; 2015a). Yet, one of his passions has attracted far less attention: conspiracy theory. Dugin was obsessed with the topic, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and continued to develop relevant ideas over the next ten to fifteen years.

Dugin is very dynamic and innovative and, in his behaviour, is less conservative by contrast to the image of himself he is creating in his publications. Over time, he presented himself as either a member of the SS Black Order, or an occult scientist, or Old Believer, or Eurasianist, or a political scientist, or finally, a sociologist.[1] Dugin's interest in conspiracies does not focus simply on local plots, but on an all-embracing world plot to introduce the "New World Order" and establish a "World Government" (Dugin 2005: 21; Bagdasarian 1999a: 4–5; 1999b: 108; Entin 2000: 70; Hagemeister 2003: 86). While developing this approach, Dugin treats conspiracy as an outcome of a sharp break with

* The study was supported by the Russian Scientific Foundation grant no. 15-18-00143. All translations of Dugin's reasoning are by the author.

1 For Dugin's rather complicated career from "non-malignant fascism" to assistance for the Russian politicians, see Moroz (2002) and Umland (2010). For an apologetic article, yet with interesting lesser known facts and evaluations, see Diunov (2008).

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religious dogmas that occurred in the Enlightenment (Dugin 2005: 22–23). Yet, in my view, conspiracy theories are a way to sneak these dogmas back in, and maintain them in the 'Era of Reason', although in modified shape (Entin 2000). Indeed, Dugin himself points to a "sacral background of conspiracy."[2] Evidently, conspiratorial constructions represent the plot's objectives in a way that resembles the numerous comments on Apocalypse. For example, Dugin emphasised that his favourite thinker René Guénon warned that the time of the Antichrist was about to come. Moreover, in his interpretation, Guénon believed that the Antichrist would appear from the "tribe of Dan," and thus came to a conclusion on the ominous role of the Diaspora Jews allegedly aspiring to build "Hell on Earth" (Dugin 2005: 73–74, 78–79). Another favourite author, Miguel Serrano, believed in the Masonic-Jewish world plot and argued that the Jews did all their best to undermine traditional world order to enthrone the Antichrist (Goodrick-Clarke 2002: 185).

All these theories predict the establishment of a 'World Government', the introduction of a uniform religion and the elimination of Christianity together with traditional cultures and nation states. Richard Hofstadter has already pointed to the apocalyptic style of thinking among those who share this approach (Hofstadter 1965: 29–30; Barkun 2003: 7–8). Indeed, conspiracy has become a secular version of the Apocalypse, which maintained many approaches that were developed in the Christian world for centuries (Barkun 2003).

Apocalyptic events are what mostly alarms and what is inevitably expected by admirers of eschatology. It is no accident that nowadays conspiracy is mostly represented by the Christian fundamentalists, who share very conservative views. In fact, their 'secular ideas' reproduce the same dogmas in different terms, which better fit modern times. Therefore, it is no wonder that conspiracy is rooted in discussions of the end times and the Antichrist's arrival. Some conspiracy theorists, including Dugin, acknowledge this fact (Dugin 2005: 5, 115–116). Moreover, eschatological images are more evident in Dugin's constructions, who presents himself as a 'traditionalist' than in the reasoning of many other Russian conspiracy thinkers. Indeed, it is in his books that one can easily find such eschatological images as both the Devil and "Prince of This World," together with the Antichrist and his "agents" (Dugin 2005: 28–29, 117–119). The views of apocalypse popular in Russia identify the adherents of the Antichrist as the Jews, with reference to Church Fathers (Derevensky 2000: 21–24). That is why an image of the Jews as the organisers of various plots aimed at the

2 Besides Christian eschatology, one has to consider a rich tradition of Demonology, which included an idea of demonic agents that want to tempt people by any mean. See Bagdasarian (1999c).

destruction of traditions is very popular in these conspiracy theories. Indeed, the early conspiracy theorists were mostly alarmed at the elimination of Christianity, which allegedly was one of the plot's major goals. This is an evident heritage of eschatology with its expectation of the misfortunes brought about by the Jews as though they did their best to prepare the Antichrist's arrival.

The "Jewish plot" still alarms many Russian conspiracy thinkers (Shnirelman 2018). They have developed a particular language, which includes a set of terms and notions expressing fears about secret societies and ominous plots aimed at Russia. This development was launched partly by the books of the Western conspiracy theorists that were intensively translated and published in Russia during the last 20 to 25 years (for details, see Shnirelman 2015b). Most of the Russian conspiracy theorists dwelt on their Anglo-American predecessors and teachers and borrowed extensive lists of secret societies from them.[3] By contrast, Dugin is based mainly on the French tradition of conspiracy,[4] which, compared to the more widespread Anglo-American current, provided his ideas with a flavour of 'originality'. His 'plot theory', which inevitably grew up from the ideas of the end times, has found its manifestation in TV programmes and publications with his active participation. In 1993, he and Iu. Vorobievsky took part in the TV project *Secret of the Century*, where they scared the TV audience with a treacherous world plot allegedly organised by the "Kike-Masons." To be sure, they did not fail to refer to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The radical-right message of this project caused its closure in 1993.

While considering the 'world plot', Dugin bases himself either on esoteric, conspiracist, or geopolitical approaches. Respectively, he suggests three different approaches, which hardly agree with each other. As a result, a reader would be confused and cannot see what he/she is suggested to follow. Yet, this is of no concern to Dugin, because, in my view, emotions are more important for him than reason, and he values irrationality above rationality. His goal is to stir up a highly emotional consumer response to the particular enemy whom he points to. With this in mind, logic proves to be irrelevant. An intensity of fear, which is infused by a particular representation of the plot issue, is what is important. Stretches and fantasies, which distort information or its meaning, are used for that. In this respect, he perfectly fits a tradition of "improvisational millennialism" defined by Michael Barkun as an "act of bricolage"

3 For example the books of Douglas Read, Anthony Sutton, Ralph Epperson, and John Coleman, which were published in Russia.

4 His most favourite authors are certainly Alain de Benoist and Jean Parvulesko. He has borrowed an idea of a struggle between the 'Two Orders' from the French Mason C. Boucher who visited Moscow in 1993. For this, see Vorobievsky (2011: 33).

(2003: 10). It is no accident that Dugin prefers to refer to fictions rather than to scholarly production. In this, Dugin readily follows his tutors from the Western New Right. Therefore, all his ideas and constructions prove to be derivative and secondary.[5]

2 Dugin's Early Career

Dugin's first steps in conspiracy were connected with the radical *Day* newspaper; since then he has published extensively on the issue (see, for example, Okhotin 1991; Dugin 1991a, 1993).[6] Whereas in the early 1990s he was serious about the "Great war of the continents," ten years later he called conspiracy a "joyful post-modern science" (Dugin 2005). In his preface to the second edition of his book on conspiracy (2005) he viewed it as a continuation of the medieval myths of the "dark forces" and "Devil's intrigues," which were now used outside of a religious context (Dugin 2005: 5).[7] He described it with certain irony and defined conspiracy as "admirable chaos and fascinating delirium." Yet, any irony immediately disappeared when he gave an account of his own conspiratorial concepts. Although he promised to "analyze conspiracy as a sociological and cultural phenomenon, as a conceptual syndrome of post-modernity" (Dugin 2005: 10), a reader would come across the same intricate conspiratorial constructions rather than any in-depth analysis. Indeed, Dugin dislikes "historical positivism" because it fails to provide a desired space for his bizarre conclusions. To be sure, he is right in that an "excessive and uncritical admiration with conspiratorial subjects is pregnant with intellectual degradation" (15).[8] Surprisingly, he himself does not follow this wise warning. Indeed, his imagination of America as the "Green country of dead," which he directly associated with the "country of Apocalypse" and called for "closing" it to fulfil some "religious obligation" (368; article originally from 1989), sounded as a voice from the Middle Ages.

5 For the New Right ideas that make up a basis for his constructions, see Martines Otero (2008): 161–167. And for his contacts with the Western New Right see Clover (2016): 174–181, 203–204.

6 The book *Konspirologia* (1993) has been republished as an extended version (Parts 2, 3, 4, 5 and the first section of Part 6 were added) under the title *Konspirologia* (*nauka o zagovorakh, sekretnykh obshchestvakh i tainoi voine*) (2005). It is noteworthy that Dugin felt uncomfortable with his former occult interest in the new environment, and has made respective changes in the title (an "occult war" was replaced with a "secret war").

7 This preface was absent in the first edition because at that time Dugin was very serious with respect to conspiracy.

8 For that, see Mosionzhik (2012): 99–101.

While discussing conspiracy, Dugin used such Jungian psychoanalytical terms as "unconscious archetypes," "collective unconsciousness," and "unconscious energy" without making any special sociological or anthropological surveys. He discussed an "archaic state of certain groups of people" being unfamiliar with these "groups" or "people" in general. "Orthodox religious mystics" were his ideal, and it is with them, and mostly their literary production, rather than with "people" that his discussions of conspiracy deal with. And it is no accident that he reveals close ties between conspiracy and "traditionalists." In his view, it was traditionalists such as himself who could openly demonstrate what was veiled in the conspiracy thinkers' constructions, namely, a "logic of sacral history," allegedly following a "rule of degradation" (Dugin 2005: 24–26).[9]

In his book Dugin provides a whole list of various plots, including a "mason plot," a "Jewish plot," a "bankers' plot," a "Bolshevik plot," a "mondialist plot," and a "sects' plot." He does not fail to refer to such, in his view, "outstanding" Russian pre-revolutionary conspiracy theorists as A. Shmakov, A. Selianinov, G. Schwarz-Bostunich, and—to be sure—Sergei Nilus (Hagemeister, this volume). Yet he associates them with an 'anti-Mason line' and keeps silent about their furious anti-Semitism. Moreover, having distanced himself from conspiracy theorists and warned against blind belief in their ideas in his preface, further on he emphasised what he called a serious nature of a "conspiracy science." He argued that it has to occupy a "central place in [the] contemporary historical field" because it discovers "sacral truth," and in contrast to scholarly concepts, its views are informed by "true and authentic tradition," by which Dugin meant religious teachings (Dugin 2005: 53–54). To put it differently, what was called "occult science" earlier, now enjoys a position within "conspiracy science."

Dugin goes so far as to enumerate "mysteries of Russian history" shaped by his own fantasy and suggests that conspiracy theorists have to study them. At this point he demonstrates a motivation for his interests: it appears that the goal of the analysis of conspiracy is not its critique, but a study of the accumulated experience for its further usage because, as he claims, history is nothing without conspiracy (Dugin 2005: 126–128). Moreover, in his view, it is impossible to understand the nature of the contemporary world without "competency in metaphysics and Tradition." Allegedly, scholarship cannot help because the 'world plot' is a "living issue of contemporary geopolitics."

9 It is noteworthy that here Dugin is following the esoteric rather than Christian view of history because he is talking not about the "end of time" that has to terminate with the Last Judgment, but about the end of the "pulsing cycle" that has to result in a "reintegration," that is, a sudden emergence of the new Golden Age. For these ideas see Shnirelman (2015a).

While making a survey of the conspiracy theorists' teachings (those of Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, René Guénon, Miguel Serrano, Jean Robén, Jean Parvulesko), Dugin demonstrates that they lacked methodology besides "intuition" and "insight." Therefore they used to interpret the same data in different and sometimes opposing ways and provide arbitrary timescales. Indeed, their "anti-positivist" science did not need any verification. The most important issues were geographical directions, colour symbolism, lunar and solar cults, religious doctrines, secret languages, initiation, and secret societies rather than economics, social structure, or real history. Dugin glorified the genius of his predecessors and was fascinated with their "insights." He himself was obsessed with binary oppositions and believed that a key to the nature of any ideas and movements was in their division into such oppositions. And he presented all this lip service as an "analysis."

The Book of Revelation of Saint John the Divine made up the very basis of Dugin's view of history. He identified the promised "Millennial Kingdom" with Russia, where, by contrast to the West and Byzantium, an arrival of the "Son of Death" was delayed (Dugin 2004: 229–232). While following eschatological ideas, Dugin provided *katechon*, or "he who now restrains" (II Thess. ii 7), with a key role in the Christian politics and philosophy as though it was saving the world from the Antichrist (223). Initially, he identified this agent with either the "God-bearing Russian people" or Russia itself, which he identified with the "Soviet Empire." In 1992 he claimed that *katechon* has lost its power after its dissolution. Yet he believed that this misfortune would not last long because allegedly Russia was "not from this world" and Jesus Christ was still its God, which promised a fast regeneration (Dugin 1992). To be sure, all these ideas were heresy from the theological point of view.[10]

Dugin never came back to these ideas again. Instead, he has focused on a history of Christianity and made an attempt to depict a process of transmission of the *katechon* mission from Byzantium to Russia. He claimed that after the Council of Florence (1438–1439) and the fall of Constantinople (1454), Byzantium has lost its *katechon* role, and the enthroning of the Antichrist has started. Ever since, Orthodox Rus' has become the 'elected kingdom' for a short period because both an independent state and Christian faith survived there, and the *katechon* function was transmitted to the Russian tsar. At the same time, while associating himself with Old Believers, Dugin maintained that the "true end of times" began in 1666 after the Church Congress, when Rus' moved

10 The Russian Orthodox authors did not find any Orthodoxy in Dugin's publications. For example, see Bulychev and Afonina (1993); Shumsky (1994): 15; Averianov (2003): 257–273; Riabinin (2009): 108–110, 366.

towards a "secular Empire." In his view, this was a result of a "Devil's obsession" and "metaphysical Russophobia" instigated by some hostile agents. After the Congress, Holy Rus' has disappeared, and an epoch of apostasy began. For Dugin, the apocalyptic period began in the late seventeenth century, and it is from this point of view that he interpreted all subsequent history up to the present day (Dugin 1997a). It is worth noting that this particular approach was developed by the Old Believers from the late seventeenth century onwards (Gurianova 1988: 19, 33–35).

3 "Occult Metaphysical War"

Eschatology still informs Dugin's imagination. In the early 1990s he realised that we lived in the end times, and ten years later he discovered a source of misfortune; it appeared that the American neoconservatives ('neocons') were consciously driving humanity to the "Kingdom of Antichrist" (Dugin 2005: 434–455).

While viewing world history in an apocalyptic way, Dugin reveals there an everlasting antagonist "occult metaphysical war" between Christianity and Judaism (Dugin 1997b: 229–230). He discovers in the Kabbalah *Book of Zohar* of the thirteenth century, a plot aimed not only at the Christians but at all peoples throughout the world as though the Jews were preparing a "ritual genocide" for them.[11] Allegedly, this has to happen before the Kingdom of the Messiah would come into being. Dugin is searching for the omens of the end times and reveals them in the restoration of the State of Israel. According to his calculations, the Messiah had to arrive in 1990. It was Dugin who brought to Russia a rumour that the 'ninth red cow' had been born in March 1997, after which the tenth one had to appear, which would be used for a sacrifice for the Messiah. Allegedly, the Jews would be permitted to enter the Temple Mount after that (Dugin 1997c).[12] Dugin's predictions failed to come into fruition in the 1990s. Yet, he is not embarrassed and once again claims that we live in the end times, and expects an arrival of the Antichrist (Dugin 2018).

In the early 1990s, Dugin claimed that at this period a struggle between Christianity and Judaism that was also a struggle between the 'Aryans' and the

11 In fact, Dugin represented a fragment of the Roman Catholic priest I. Pranaitis' accusatory talk at the "Beilis trial" of 1911–13 when the Jew was falsely accused of ritual murder.

12 This information arrived from the Jewish fundamentalists who talked of the preparations for a restoration of the Third Temple in Jerusalem. See Wright (1998). For that issue also, see Ariel (2002).

Judeo-Masons', had to escalate. He believed that nowadays there was a struggle between two occult Orders at the eve of the end times, when the Jews supported by the Vatican were establishing their 'New World Order', that is, an order of the 'Lunar Kingdom', which means their dictatorship over the goyim. Dugin viewed himself as one of a few defenders of the 'Solar ideology', which stood against the 'Judeo-Masonic World Republic'. It is noteworthy that he finished his reasoning with an expression of his belief in the final victory of the North over South, that is, the "White people against the Semites." It was no accident that he presented the 'Nordic swastika' as a symbol both of Aryanism and of Christianity. In this context it looked as an indispensable element of the struggle against the "Jews" identified as the "Semites" (Dugin 1997b). To put it differently, Dugin's eschatology appears a replica of the Nazi prototype.[13] It is worth noting that in the early 1990s, Dugin was issuing the journal *Elementy*, which glorified the German right wing of the Weimar period and fostered eschatological notions. While furiously attacking liberals, it called them "mondialists" and ascribed to them an aspiration to welcome the Messiah. Its authors were fascinated with the SS officers and demonstrated their sympathy towards the Nazis, although the latter were criticised for their "mistakes" (Luks 2002: 276–284).

Dugin's book on conspiracy included his articles of more than ten years. For an attentive reader it is evident that the author's views changed with almost every new book he read. However, a development of a new concept never resulted in throwing away an earlier one. For example, after Dugin read a book by the Eurasian Yaakov Bromberg (1931) in the mid-1990s, he stopped considering all the Jews the "enemies of humanity." Instead, he has constructed two groups being on terms with each other, namely the conservative Hassidim, whom he viewed as the allies of the Eurasians, and the secular assimilated Jews, the Westernisers, whom he stubbornly treated as the enemies (Dugin 1997d).

Yet, this idea entirely contradicted his conspiratorial concept of 1992, when he associated Judaism as such with the ruinous 'creationism'—indeed, whereas secular Jews proved to be outside this tradition, the Hassidim, that is, 'creationists', were depicted as 'allies'. Nonetheless, in the second edition of the book, Dugin went so far as to suggest several contrasting views of the Jews, shaped by him in various periods. On the one hand, he ascribed some "uniform psychotype" to all the Diaspora Jews. On the other hand, the book contained his article of 1991, where "Zionism" was separated from the evil "mondialism," whose

13 In one of his articles, Dugin claimed that his beloved "conservative revolution," with its Russophile and imperial stance, differed from national-socialism. Yet, it seems that he did not find any differences between them in their attitude towards Jews, and he had nothing against this attitude. See Dugin (1991b).

followers were the Jews, who did not share the ideas of "Zionism" as "local nationalism" (Dugin 2005: 334–337). At the same time, a reader would be confused with his idea of 1996, when he has constructed an opposition of the conservative Hassidim (following Lev Gumilev, he identified them as the Khazars[14]) and the Jews, the Westernisers (557–558). Indeed, above all, Dugin ascribed "Eastern psychological type" to the former and believed (in contrast to well-established facts) that it was from them that the Marxist revolutionaries were recruited.[15] It was unclear which particular approach Dugin favoured himself.

Dugin's method is based on allegedly everlasting "metaphysical dogmas" and "inborn psycho-mental directions (psycho-genetic factor)." That is why he needs no empirical studies. Indeed, his method allows him to know everything ahead—one has to understand the "transcendent principle," and the Truth would appear. Therefore, Dugin is not interested in particular persons, only 'races' and 'ethnoi' make sense, because, in his view, they are bearers of particular ideologies. Hence, he arrives at a conclusion about an opposition and incompatibility of the "Semitic (Lunar) mentality" with its "creationism" and "Indo-European (Solar) outlook" with its "manifestationism" (Dugin 2005: 155–168).[16] Dugin discovers the latter among the "yellow race" and explains this with a reference to the "traces of the early impact of the Aryan people." In his view, "manifestationism has a monopoly to the Truth," and "creationism" permanently disputes this and, thus, occupies itself with an undermining activity. It is noteworthy that in the course of the further "investigations" Dugin discovers that [Russian] Orthodoxy can be associated neither with "creationism," nor with "manifestationism." One is curious how it fits the desired Truth, but Dugin declines to ask this question.

To explain an inconsistency of the scheme in question, Dugin claims that esoteric organisations of the opposite type exist within each worldview complex. Yet, he proves to be less interested in why they emerged and how they fit the pattern as a whole. To put it differently, his complex speculative scheme is a fantasy of the armchair thinker, who is far removed from real life. It cannot explain anything, and any attempts to co-ordinate the armchair constructs with true facts lead one to numerous contradictions. In particular, Dugin does not explain how the former Jew Paul (with his "creationist orientation") could develop Christianity as "Aryan in spirit." And why have the "Aryan descendants,"

14 For the Khazar myth, see Shnirelman (2002).

15 He acknowledged that he borrowed this idea from M. Agursky (1980). For quite other reasons for the Jews to take part in all the Russian revolutions of the early twentieth century, see Deich (1925).

16 Evidently this is a reproduction of the well-known fascist and neo-fascist myths (Del Boca and Giovana (1969): 86).

who were close to Rome, chosen "creationist direction" (Catholicism is viewed by Dugin as "Judaized Christianity") whereas their Orthodox descendants chose the "manifestationist one"? And how could the "Jewish Kabbalists" be baptised? Did they become "Aryans" as a result? How did the "psycho-genetic factor" work in all these cases? Dugin never asks any of these questions. What is important to him is to prove that there is a struggle between the creationist "Order of the Dead Head" and manifestationist "Order of the Living Heart" as a "humanist rationality" against an "emotionality of heart" (Dugin 2005: 188–193). He associates himself with the latter. And history in his presentation looks an eternal struggle between the Aryans and the Jews, "manifestationism against creationism, or the Solar paradigm against the Lunar one." In fact, he is interested in myth rather than in history. That is why he does not fail to use fakes, such as the notorious "Ura Linda Chronicle" of Hermann Wirth.[17] And that is why he is obsessed with the "Polar Homeland of the humanity,"[18] which is not acknowledged by any contemporary specialist.

In 1995, Dugin completed an essay, "Oder of Iliah," where he restored an obsolete idea of allegedly entirely opposite nature of the Semitic nomads and sedentary Indo-Europeans (he even used the obsolete term "Indo-European race") (Dugin 2005: 220–246). However, it is well established that early Indo-Iranians and Iranians (Scythians and Sarmatians) were nomadic pastoralists, as were the Indo-Aryans, who arrived in India. Dugin has failed to consider this because otherwise an obsolete opposition of "Semites vs Indo-Europeans" proved to be incorrect and irrelevant. It is noteworthy that he presented this scheme as a result of his own intensive intellectual work although one dealt with a restoration of ideas that were popular at the dawn of scholarship but thrown away later on.

Dugin ascribed to 'Jews' an aspiration to introduce the 'New World Order', that is, a "Jewish dictatorship over the 'Goyim peoples'" as though this was a goal of the 'Order of the Dead Head'. Allegedly nowadays this agent put a heavy pressure on "Hellenic-Aryan Christianity." That is why, in Dugin's view, nowadays chaos, which demonstrated a will to resistance, was preferable in contrast to order. He called for a "new crusade," a revolt of the "Solar forces" against the "Lunar usurpers." He maintained:

> This will be a great movement of the forces of spiritual North against a civilization of South, a sacred war of the Cross-bearing Hearts against 'smart heads' of the Jews and Saracens, a battle for a seizer of the Holy Land and Holy Sepulcher from those, who through their material liking and claims

17 For this fake see Jacob-Friesen (1934), Mulot (1990), Mosionzhik (2012): 94–99.

18 For this myth, see Godwin (1993); Shnirelman (2014).

> for national-religious exceptionality have challenged ethic of Victim and Heroism, the Aryan ethic of Love and Loyalty, Honesty and Justice.
>
> DUGIN 2005: 216.

To put it briefly, although sometimes Dugin corrects his views, one point never changes, which is his hatred of liberalism and democracy. And today he calls for a crusade against the USA and the West, and it is not just an ideological struggle, which he has in mind; indeed, he claims that in order to win one has to "erase from the Earth the spiritual and physical areas, where the world heresy has emerged" (Dugin 2014: 101).

It is also worth noting that among the most important ideologies highlighted by Dugin it is an "absolute Right" including Nazism, which he admires most of all. And he lists Hitler among "historical heroes," "bearers of a deep Objectivity." It is no accident that Dugin highly respects Julius Evola, one of the fathers of European neo-fascism, and is fascinated with another Italian neo-fascist, Claudio Mutti. It is also no accident that he admires the swastika as allegedly one of the "preferable symbols of the Christian tradition." Finally, twenty years ago he justified racism as a "doctrine, which approves natural, evident and omnipresent inequality" (Dugin 2005: 337). Today, after a new turnabout, he rejects racism, yet he associates it mainly with the USA and Europe as he did earlier (Dugin 2014: 51–53).[19]

Dugin claimed that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the result of yet another plot, although in this case he used a geopolitical rather than an esoteric approach, and he pointed not to the North vs South confrontation, but to the West against the East,[20] a "marine civilisation" against a "terrestrial one," "Atlanticism" against "Eurasianism." He did not explain how esoteric and geopolitical plots could fit together. Instead, he blamed experts for their "ignorance." After certain Western conspiracy theorists (Barkun 2003: 65–67) he monotonously listed such conspiratorial "mondialist" organisations as the Club of Rome, Council on Foreign Relations, the Bilderberg Group, Trilateral Commission, and the like (Dugin 2005: 319–323, 346–351). The USA, with their allegedly endemic Russophobia, appear to be the core of all these organisations. For Dugin, Russophobia is an extension of some evangelical eschatological views, which present the Americans as the closest relatives and allies of the Israelis and claim that they are scarred with an expected assault from Russia by "Gog's people" (Dugin 2005: 381).[21]

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19 For his own racism, see Shnirelman (2011), 2: 218–227.

20 Dugin uses these definitions with a symbolic rather than geographic meaning, because sometimes he identifies the West with the "North" and unites Eurasia with the "South."

21 In this he follows S.M. Hammel's thesis (2000).

4 America, the Antichrist

It seems that by the time of writing the referred article, that is, by the late 1990s, Dugin had forgotten the confrontation between creationism and manifestationism, the Aryans and the Semites. Indeed, it is difficult to co-ordinate an esoteric approach with a geopolitical one, it is also impossible to relate the Aryan unity to an opposition of 'Sea' and 'Land', and religious conflicts can be hardly restricted by rigid geographical or political borders. Moreover, a universal break between 'Sea' and 'Land' is related by Dugin to relationships only between West (USA and Western Europe) and Eurasia (Russia). There is no room there for other countries and continents, and Dugin's less effective attempts to provide them with such room reveal a poverty of his reductionist approach.

Nonetheless, now it is America, which Dugin called the "Western Antichrist." He predicted—allegedly—an inevitable clash between it and Russia, which would be caused by eschatological reasons and Messianic goals (Dugin 2005: 355–368). Thus, in his view, an idea of the end times has to be the basis of contemporary world politics. Yet, it is the 'neocons' who run American world politics, that is, a small but a very influential group of high-status Americans of Jewish origin. So, Dugin's thoughtful reflections lead him to conclude that the major 'enemies' appear to be the same Jews, who are building up the Kingdom of Antichrist. He fails to mention only one point, namely, that the great majority of the American Jews by no means share the neocons' views.

More recently, Dugin has become fascinated with Byzantium as an ideal "millennial Christian Kingdom." Now he emphasises his loyalty to Russian Orthodoxy, yet, like Sergei Nilus, fills it with a mystic content and identifies Russia with the *katechon* as though Holy Rus' appears to be the "last home of katechon." And he calls for a preparation for the Last Coming (Dugin n. d.).

Why does Dugin develop his evidently inconsistent concepts without any attempts to avoid contradictions? We can hardly refer to his inability to follow logical reasoning. Instead, there is a more appropriate explanation. Indeed, Dugin is an ideologist rather than a scholar. And his ambition is to stir up deserved emotions in the general public. All means are appropriate for this end because creating fears seems much more important than any logic (Shekhovtsov 2009a; 2009b; Engström 2014: 358–360, 367).

It is noteworthy that Dugin was an advisor to the Russian State Duma speaker Gennadii Seleznev in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and became a head of the center for geopolitical expertise at the Duma's Advisory Council on National Security supervised by the LDPR of Vladimir Zhirinovsky. From March 2012 he was a member of the Expert-Consulting Committee serving the then State Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin. Evidently, conspiracy theories are in

demand among Russian authorities. Meanwhile, the illusory world to which Dugin invites his followers brings about failures at the international arena, if politicians blindly follow his advice (Barbashin and Thoburn 2014; Clover 2016: 17, 307–308, 330).[22]

That esoteric and conspiratorial anti-Semitism is embedded in Dugin's concepts (for this, also see Laruelle 2008: 135–138) is no accident. A trend to explain the dissolution of the USSR with a reference to a 'secret plot' and to accuse 'International Jews' for that is an intrinsic characteristic of the Russian school of conspiracism. In the 1990s this was one of the major reasons for the Russian nationalists and communists to unite within a well-known national-patriotic "red-brown" movement, an active member of which was Dugin with *Elementy*. Anti-Semitism was embedded into their ideology of the 'Third way',[23] aimed against an 'International financial capital' as though it followed instructions of the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Matil 2007: 87–89). Today Dugin shares a so-called civilisational approach and claims that the conflict of civilisations is inevitable (Neef 2014). Indeed, this idea is very much characteristic of contemporary Russian conspiracy science, where the *Protocols* enjoy high respect (Hagemeister, this volume).

5 Conclusion

Thus, the case in question shows that, first, conspiracy is actually an extension of eschatology and proves to be its contemporary, secularised version, and, second, as a result, it demands an image of the enemy and is tirelessly searching for it. Yet, whereas eschatology can be satisfied with an obscure image of the enemy presented as some 'Dark Forces', conspiracy demands an image of more definite enemies, such as particular races, ethnic and social groups, as well as some particular persons or organisations. In this context, the Jews are ascribed a special role. Within popular versions of eschatology they are presented as reliable adherents of the Antichrist who make preparations for his arrival. That is why they allegedly aspire to eliminate national states and cultural traditions, to establish the world government and to introduce a uniform world religion. All this follows the logic of the end times as it was narrated by St. John the Divine.

22 At the same time, as Marlene Laruelle acknowledges, "Dugin's theories are not the direct inspiration for Putin's regime." See Laruelle (2015b): xiii.

23 Yet, since 2007, Dugin associates himself with an idea of the 'Fourth way', allegedly different from communism, fascism, and liberalism. He borrowed this idea (as many others) from Alain de Benoist.

Conspiracy lacks a figure of the Antichrist but maintains a belief in the ominous role of the Jews. Hence, it demands for a replacement of the logic of eschatology by a new one. It is for this end that it badly needs an essentialist approach, which views racial and ethnic groups as well defined bodies with well-established, rigid boundaries. Allegedly they enjoy not only particular cultures but also particular ideologies or outlooks and have special missions in this world. As the Jews appear to be adherents of Judaism, some conspiracy theorists do all their best to find there a driving force for any of their activity as well as an explanation of their mission. Moreover, it is from this point that they view various Christian congregations and ascribe evil motives to those that, in their minds, move to a compromise with Judaism. Hence, there is a demonisation of Catholicism and Protestantism together with the West in general, which is an evident characteristic of Russian eschatology.

Yet, a role of the Jews looks even more ominous in conspiracy than in eschatology. Indeed, in eschatology they play a subsidiary role as the Antichrist's assistants, and they can even revolt against him and be baptised. By contrast, conspiracy provides them with an independent role as the masters, who establish their rule over the world and enslave all other peoples. In this context the Jews themselves appear to be a collective Antichrist. The more heroic and admirable are those who stand against this 'world evil'. This role is granted to the ethnic Russians in the Russian conspiracy theories. Whereas Russian eschatology identifies them or Russia in general with a *katechon*, this term is usually not used by the Russian conspiracy authors, but a function of a resistance against the 'world evil' is alive. One can find all of this in Dugin's concepts, which are interesting in that they make a bridge between eschatology and conspiracy. Indeed, it is less easy to find traces of eschatology in the works of many other Russian conspiracy authors. Yet an analysis of this vast literature is out of the scope of the present chapter.

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CHAPTER 21

Conspiracy Theories and Neo-Nazism in the Cultic Milieu

Paul Jackson

1 Introduction

What is the appeal of neo-Nazism? Its political agenda is hostile and radically out of step with the norms of mainstream society, its vision for an alternate type of modern world is racist and extreme, and, perhaps most unappealing of all, even if one sympathises with its core ideas, it must be clear that it is never likely to succeed in the ultimate ambition of installing new states akin to Hitler's Third Reich. Yet, despite these objections, and many others that can be all too easily identified, small numbers of people continue to develop political organisations, magazines, websites, music and other types of cultural production and social networks steeped in romanticisation of the Nazi era, calling for its return. Many are attracted for easily explicable reasons other than its ideas, such as searching for a sense of community or engaging in youthful rebellion that is fleeting, and so do not hold the movement's core propositions. However, for others, those who do 'believe', what is the allure? Do its evocations on religious themes and engagement in conspiracy theories help to explain its appeal?

Exploring some of the ideational dynamics of the neo-Nazi mindset allows for a clearer appreciation that neo-Nazis are more often than not driven by healthy minds that use taboo and the extreme, combined with a holistic thought pattern, to create belief in conspiracies while more generally evoking a sense of the higher and a vision of redemption. This chapter attempts to offer such an analysis by comparing variants of British and American neo-Nazi culture from the 1960s to the 1990s. It draws on documents located in a major collection of extreme-right material linked to neo-Nazi groups held at the University of Northampton.[1] Before exploring this material, the chapter will summarise related trends in fascism studies, provide an analysis of conspiracy

1 This collection was created by the anti-fascist organisation Searchlight, and is based at the University of Northampton. For further information, see http://www.northampton.ac.uk/the-searchlight-archives/. Accessed 15/08/2016.

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theories, and wider reflections on religion, to develop an approach to the topic that allows for interpreting the many neo-Nazi groups that have developed in the post-1945 period as collectively constituting a part of the cultic milieu also explored by others in this volume—albeit as an extreme element of it.

2 Fascism Studies and the Cultic Milieu

Historically, cultures of fascism usually have been underpinned by conspiracy theories, which justify a sense of antagonism with the political and cultural mainstream that a wide variety of fascists have opposed in powerful ways. In *Fascism and Genocide* (2011), Aristotle Kallis explains that the justification for many (though far from all) attacks by fascists on their perceived enemies have developed as a consequence of such communities becoming seen not merely as scapegoats for negative social issues, but instead being defined as a 'constituent enemy', or an imminent existential threat. Underpinned by ideas such as conspiracy narratives, 'constituent enemy' communities are understood by fascists as people invested with powers to destroy the idealised national and or racial group that a fascist movement seeks to defend. By developing worldviews where the protagonists of conspiracy theories are deemed as existential threats, extreme and even deadly violence becomes a framed as a justifiable response, interpreted as a form of self-defence.

Kallis's exploration of the ways Jewish people become demonised to such extraordinary degrees by fearful fascist rhetoric, especially that of the Nazis, points to the important role played by conspiratorial thinking in such messaging. Foundational texts for Nazis and neo-Nazis, including the highly influential *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, as well as many other derivatives, reproduce the core message of a Jewish-led conspiracy *representing* some form of existential threat to the race or nation. Like other modern scholars of fascism, Kallis also highlights that the ideology revolves around the promise of change, purification, and renewal, not merely hate and a desire to destroy. Increasingly, it is recognised that fascism can have some form of religious dimension too. The religious and the revolutionary are related concepts, and not just in fascism studies. For example, reflecting on the nature of religion in the wake of 9/11, Bruce Lincoln's *Holy Terrors* (2006) argued powerfully that while religion certainly can be used as a force for retaining an existing order, evocations of it can also have a powerful role for those who seek to break down hegemonic forces and usher in the new in radical ways. As he continues, religious ideas can offer people not merely a sense of transformation, but a radical new sense of being steeped in elemental change in the immediate future (Lincoln 2006).

While Lincoln's focus was wider than cultures of neo-Nazism, there has been growing interest in the nexus between faith, revolution, and hatred among scholars of fascism as well. Especially for those interested in examining more recent neo-Nazi fascist cultures, Colin Campbell's idea of the cultic milieu has become an important part of the critical language for examining cultures that steep themselves in opposition to mainstream perspectives and evoke myriad conspiratorial elements to support extreme views. This was provoked in part by Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw's edited collection, *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization* (2002), and the term has subsequently been drawn on by many central figures in fascism studies, such as Roger Griffin (2007). The interest in the cultic milieu among scholars of fascism also represents a wider trend within fascism studies to move away from moralistic, judgemental approaches to the topic, and towards fostering a more nuanced, sophisticated understanding of the ideational dynamics of those who can be labelled 'fascist' (Mosse 2002; Antlif 2007; Feldman 2013; Maertz 2008). This cultural turn, which has been built on debates attempting to define 'generic fascism', has also tended to focus on detailed exploration of some core themes identified by Roger Griffin (1993, 2007), especially the theme of rebirth, as crucial to all forms of fascism (Eatwell 2003; Payne 1995; Mann 2004).

Also reflecting concerns developed by Lincoln, historians including Emilio Gentile (1996, 2005) have sought to comment at length on the way fascisms can offer followers a sense of metaphysical 'truth', presented also as a totalising political cause. Gentile has promoted the term 'political religion' to underline this point. As Griffin and others also stress, fascism can be seen as a contemporary type of politics that emerges within liberal, plural political spaces, yet fosters and aggressively acts upon a mythology proposing the need for an anti-liberal revolution to redeem and 'purify' modern society, in order to save a nation or race from supposed destruction. Griffin's pithy definition of fascism as palingenetic, populist, ultra-nationalism summarises this perspective (1993). While not all scholars of fascism accept this conceptualization (Renton 1999), it has become one prominent approach within fascism studies, and is adopted here as a basis for the term 'fascism', as well as the specifically Nazi-inspired variation of fascism focused on in this chapter.

These debates, arguing that fascist ideology can be seen as somehow 'for' something and that its adherents pursue a visionary revolutionary agenda, have also helped to inform fresh questioning regarding the religious claims of many variants of fascism. Such approaches have often been infused with borrowings from elements of cultural anthropology and other studies of new religious movements, and include Karla Poewe's (2006) interest in alternative

religious narratives found in Nazi settings, and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's seminal exploration of the bewildering array of religious and cultic elements found in marginalised forms of fascism that have developed since 1945. Goodrick-Clarke (2003) in particular emphasised the Manichean quality to such marginalised neo-Nazi cultures, crucial to their appeal, with Jews seen as incarnations of 'evil'. This often gives neo-Nazi cultures a moralistic tenor that underpins and helps to legitimise radically oppositional stances to modern plural societies. What this reframing of debates around the cultural dynamics of 'fascist', 'Nazi', and 'neo-Nazi' ideology have achieved is a perspective that is interested in exploring how fascism's protagonists understand their activism, and how they create alternate, politicised belief systems.

The growing effort within fascism studies to see neo-Nazi movements through Campbell's lens of the cultic milieu, and to recognise its genuine efforts to offer followers a totalised space where politics and religious ideas are fused, also chimes with debates in the study of religion and conspiracy theories. A number of figures have claimed that at least some form of conspiracy theory is a near ubiquitous component of the cultic milieu, in its many left-wing, spiritual, fascist, and even neo-Nazi varieties. For example, Michael Barkun's *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2003) drew on Campbell's term explicitly and highlighted conspiracy theory's central role, while also defining conspiracy theories themselves, somewhat neatly, as arguments holding three key claims pointing to a holistic mindset: "nothing happens by accident," "nothing is as it seems," and "everything is connected" (Barkun 2003: 3–4). Others, including Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, have also reflected on the relationship between conspiracy theories and the cultic milieu. While highlighting the value of Christopher Partridge's related term 'occultic milieu', a modification of Campbell's own concept, they stress: "Conspiracy thinking is … *built into* stigmatized knowledge claims as a standard secondary elaboration" (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015: 372). They go on to explain that conspiracy theories are central components of the cultic milieu as they offer ways to explain away wider society's rejection of the deeply held beliefs their followers promote. Asprem and Dyrendal also suggest that conspiracy theories both justify the core ideas of a cultic milieu, in that they explain to the dedicated the reasons for their marginalised nature, and give hope for redress, reinforcing the inherent utopianism that characterises them.

Meanwhile, Bradley Franks *et al.* (2013) argue that the religious elements found in many conspiracy theories are psychologically akin to beliefs proposed by more established religions. They present conspiracies as both products of the plurality of modernity, and ideas capable of offering a radical alternative. As they continue: "cultural conditions of pluralism and secularism are

preconditions for the 'bricolage' that engenders a CT [conspiracy theory]. But on the other hand specific CTs may attempt to counter such pluralism" (Franks *et al.* 2013: 10). This mixture of recombining ideas in creative ways, yet rejecting pluralism, can be seen with neo-Nazi use of conspiracy theories particularly clearly. Moreover, Franks *et al.* stress that the lack of a full and compete elaboration of every component of the conspiracy theory requires an element of faith, though this faith does not automatically lead to what they call "counter-conspiracy action." Indeed, it is worth being aware that belief in conspiracy theories can also be quite disempowering: their holistic nature can suggest that the forces allegedly working against the 'true' cause of the cultic milieu are too powerful to be challenged directly—at least in the present.

With these points in mind, before exploring some evocative examples of neo-Nazi culture it is useful to give this term some clear boundaries, and summarise the relationship between neo-Nazism, the cultic milieu, and conspiracism. Presented merely as an ideal typical abstraction, the following theoretical model will be used to help structure readings of various, diffuse examples of neo-Nazi cultures examined throughout the rest of this chapter:

> *Neo-Nazism*: a manifestation of the fascist cultic milieu, primarily and explicitly inspired by the racial ideology of Hitler and the Nazi era, that creatively recalibrates Nazism for new political contexts that have developed since 1945, and synthesises interpretations of Nazism with many new ideas. As with all areas of the cultic milieu, this is a dynamic, ever-changing phenomenon expressed in a wide range of cultural forms that diverge over time and in different national contexts. It offers adherents myriad variations of supposedly esoteric truths, seen as ignored by the political mainstream, which are used to promote a sense of 'mission', justified by what are seen as 'higher' forces. Inspired by the conspiracism of Nazism itself, neo-Nazi cultures are predicated on a conspiratorial mindset that frames Jewish people in particular as both 'evil' and an existential threat, while neo-Nazis themselves see their actions opposing such demonised figures as legitimate and justified. This can be used to legitimise hatred and violence to Jewish people, and others who are deemed to support them too.[2]

As a basis for examining neo-Nazi literature, this model raises some interesting research questions. How do neo-Nazis generate clear narratives dividing

2 I have developed a fuller ideal typical definition for neo-Nazism elsewhere. See Jackson (2017: Ch. 1).

the world into battles between 'good' and 'evil', or rather between Aryans and Jews? How do they use these frameworks to legitimise a deeply held sense of faith in a marginalised cause, connecting believers with something 'higher'? And how do articulations of these themes differ over time and space?

Such questions can be answered historically, by comparing examples of the ways conspiracy and religiosity are evoked in the cultural products of neo-Nazi groups, especially their magazines, books, and other print material. Of course, this approach is also problematic, and can suggest overly neat interpretations of what are in reality much more messy situations. What people read and even write is not necessarily what they think. As noted above, those active in neo-Nazi groups are often drawn for reasons other than its ideas. With this caveat in mind, the model set out above does allow for a focus on developing readings of the cultural production of neo-Nazi contexts, exploring ways in which conspiratorial and cultic elements combine. Before engaging with these neo-Nazi cultures, it is useful to revisit briefly one of their key idols, Adolf Hitler, and the conspiratorial perspective he articulated in *Mein Kampf*.

3 Hitler, *Mein Kampf* and the Alleged Jewish Existential Threat

A sense of the cultic and connecting people with something 'higher' was a much-noted element of Germany's culture in the Nazi era. Eyewitnesses such as William H. Shirer commented on this, describing events such as a Nuremberg rally in 1934 as having "something of the mysticism and religious fervour of an Easter or Christmas mass … In such an atmosphere no wonder, then, that every word dropped by Hitler seemed like an inspired Word from on high" (Shirer 1942: 18–19). Drawing out faith in the 'higher' cause of the Third Reich has been much debated among historians of the Nazi regime. Hans Maier (2004) and Michael Burleigh (2000), among others, have examined the religion-like qualities that Hitler's state sought to draw out. Figures such Kallis (2011), also stress that conspiracism combined with a narrative of redemption and purification was central to the Nazi ideological perspective. These components have been of paramount significance for neo-Nazi forms of fascism as well, as by definition these fascists derive their inspiration from the Nazis.

While many figures contributed to the Nazi worldview—from Alfred Rosenberg to Hans F.K. Günther—much Nazi conspiracy theory thinking emanated from the writings of Hitler himself, and again many (though not all) neo-Nazis still regard him as their Führer and a guru figure. Evocative of Hitler's idealised position as a Christ-like figure, some neo-Nazi cultures even propose the need for an alternate calendar, with each 'new year' beginning on Hitler's birthday,

April 20 (indeed, at the time of writing in the summer of 2016 we are in YF-127).[3] Moreover, *Mein Kampf* offers an important representative case study for briefly examining Nazi thinking on anti-Semitic conspiracism. Hitler's discussion of the alleged Jewish plot to overtake modern Germany was a core feature of his political autobiography; various sections of the book gravitated around his holistic interpretation of history through a Manichean meta-narrative centred on a conflict between Jews and Aryans, developing over many centuries.[4]

Throughout *Mein Kampf*, Jews are talked about in wholly negative terms, while Hitler's ideas on a Jewish plot militating against the Aryan race was most fully articulated in the section 'Nation and Race'. Here, Hitler tried to explain how Jews had "never possessed a State … and had to be counted among the ranks of the nomads" (Hitler 1941 [1925]: 418). Typical of the use of emotive language to style Jewish people as an existential threat, he also expressly stated they operated merely as "parasites" (Hitler 1941 [1925]: 419). Hitler spent some time unpacking an often hazy meta-narrative in which he claimed Jewish people began their infiltration of an Aryan Germany in Roman times, initially taking the role of visiting tradesmen. Gradually, Hitler explained, Jews became more familiar and established, and so settled within villages. Over time, Jews sought to gain ever more power and influence, using their skills with trade and money to buy this from the monarchy and other powerful groups. This eventually led to what Hitler called the "Court Jew," who was able to influence institutions of power, especially the Habsburg Monarchy. In a period roughly following Frederick the Great (Hitler's timings are not clearly expressed in the text), he then claimed Jews were able to change how people viewed them. They stopped being seen as 'foreigners', a development that he noted horrified figures such as Goethe. Moreover, with Jews becoming seen as 'German', he continued that "they were able to fully infiltrate German society, and claim equal rights, allowing for further extension of Jewish influence." It was around this time—the early nineteenth century—that Hitler believed Jews were able to gain control of international finance capital as its influence grew in the nineteenth century, as well as the modern press, all of which allowed them to dominate the bourgeoisie, who became a tool of ever-growing Jewish power. In a

3 James Harting, 'The Hitlerian New Year', at http://www.theneworder.org/national-socialism/idea-movement/the-hitlerian-new-year/ Accessed 15/08/2016.

4 It is also worth stressing that the text was written when Hitler's own movement was still quite marginal, and when his organisation was primarily just one element in the wider, anti-Semitic, *Volkish* milieu of Weimar Germany, that became particularly anti-Semitic given the ending of the First World War (Kershaw 1998: 243–245). As the Nazi party grew before taking office, Hitler even distanced himself from the text for a period, as he was fearful it appeared too extreme.

similarly generalised way, Hitler claimed that Jews then developed Marxism as a means to control the proletariat. As he continued: "First he ['the Jews'] uses the bourgeoisie as the battle ram against the feudal world, then the worker against the bourgeois world," adding that "he ['the Jew'] knew how to gain by sneaking the civil rights for himself in the shadow of the bourgeoisie, thus he hopes now that in the worker's fight for his existence, he will find the way towards a leadership of his own" (Hitler 1941 [1925]: 444).

Hitler's narrative was clearly developed as a means to 'reveal' a teleological quality to Jewish interests, claiming their power was ever growing, and would result in the downfall of the German nation and the race. Rhetorically, the entire section on 'Race and Nation' was based on generalities and proclamations; it was holistic rather than analytical. One of the few pieces of 'evidence' that was cited was, inevitably, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Questions regarding its authenticity were discussed, and dismissed, before Hitler added, revealingly:

> It makes no difference from the head of which Jew these disclosures come, but decisive it is that they demonstrate, with a truly horrifying certainty, the nature and the activity of the Jewish people and expose them in their inner connection as well as in their ultimate final aims. But the best criticism applied to them is reality. He who examines the historical development of the past hundred years, from the points of view of this book, will also immediately understand the clamor of the Jewish press. For once this book has become the common property of a people, the Jewish danger is bound to be considered as broken. (1941 [1925]: 424).

Clearly, imbuing Jews with a powerful, yet hidden, influence, describing their activities as 'having a goal', one that would lead to the destruction of the Aryan race, was central to Hitler's version of an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. Declaring the existence of, rather than actually documenting and proving, the conspiracy was deemed the way to break down its all-threatening power.

Mein Kampf is an important book for neo-Nazis. It can be found on many 'essential readings' lists in clandestine magazines, and is regularly promoted by neo-Nazi bookstores. Though many individual neo-Nazi activists may not have read it, or have merely 'dipped in', the text also acts as a symbol of core piece of taboo literature for a movement that by definition looks to the Nazi period for its central, animating ideas. The ideal typical model set out earlier defined neo-Nazism as reinterpretations of Nazi ideas for new contexts. With this in mind, what follows will explore how neo-Nazis have reconfigured elements of Hitler's own story of hidden Jewish forces, and used them to construct Nazi-inspired

movements in altered circumstances. It will explore how they have used such conspiracies to help evoke their own variants of a neo-Nazi cultic milieu.

To address these issues, following the model outlined at the end of the previous section, it will also show that neo-Nazi cultures are not homogeneous. To help explore diversity, what follows will examine primarily British and American neo-Nazi cultures from the 1960s to the 1990s, itself part of a wider, nebulous neo-Nazi and neo-fascist cultic milieu. While this culture is diffuse and variegated, it is also one that has had a particularly strong relationship of sharing ideas and a sense of common cause across the Atlantic (Jackson and Shekhovtsov 2014). Almost akin to fungi that on the surface appear as separate entities yet are connected by mycorrhizal networks to share nutrients, so Anglo-American neo-Nazi cultures comprises a range of discrete groups and organisations that collectively foster an interconnected cultic milieu, both geographically and over time. With this in mind, what follows is an effort to map some of these interconnections, yet also to recognise their cultural specificity and difference too.

4 The Growth of Transnational Neo-Nazism and Conspiracy Theories in the 1960s

As the neo-Nazi milieu is inherently variegated and heterogeneous, its development cannot be reduced to a simple 'story'. One evocative activist useful for commencing discussion on the roots of transnational neo-Nazism is Arnold Leese, a figure some American neo-Nazis continue to reference in their literature, and who inspired British neo-Nazi cultures as they developed after 1945. Opposed to Mosley's British Union of Fascists in the 1930s, Leese developed a tiny rival group called the Imperial Fascist League, which slavishly articulated Nazi-style biological racism and conspiracism (Thurlow 1998; Linehan 2000). It published a monthly newspaper called *The Fascist*, which narrated the growth of the Nazi regime through an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory lens. For example, when Austria was annexed by the Nazi regime in 1938, it reported that "Another country has been freed from Jewish Money Power," adding Hitler's timing was excellent as "the Jew Government of Russia was busy eating itself … the Jew Blum … had no backing" and "Britain's Jew Government had no confidence in the British people's support for a policy of interference in the affairs of Central Europe" (*The Fascist* 1938: 1). Endorsement of Hitler through a discourse highlighting his ability to outsmart the hidden yet interconnected conspiracy by Jews, combined with the belief that Britain's own government was also controlled by the same forces, shine through in such typical statements.

Having served time in prison during the Second World War for his politics, after 1945 it was Leese, not Mosley, who acted as the father figure to a new generation of emergent neo-Nazis in Britain. His book from 1945, influential among this new generation, *The Jewish War of Survival* (1945), claimed that Jews had not only started, but had actually 'won' the war as their position was enhanced by Germany's defeat and the nature of the peace. Revelling in such a counter-intuitive position, Leese went on to influence numerous figures within a tiny Nazi-inspired cultic milieu that continued into post-1945 Britain, one that was fully supportive of the Nazi regime and its extreme attitudes towards Jewish people. Among the new generation of activists Leese inspired was Colin Jordan, who became a lifelong proponent of neo-Nazism in Britain, from the 1950s to his death in the 2009. In 1955, Leese helped to finance publication of Jordan's first book, *Fraudulent Conversion*, which expanded on Leese's ideas by asserting that, by the 1950s, two competing elements of a Jewish plot were working in competition with each other. With minimal evidence, Jordan described how Communist Jews based in the Soviet Union were set against the Zionist Jews, whose new homeland was Israel but whose influence was especially strong in America, as well as Britain (Jordan 1955). Anti-Semitic conspiracism was re-calibrated to explain early Cold War geopolitics.

Jordan was part of a group of British activists who also included John Tyndall, leader of the National Front in the 1970s, who learned their politics within the conspiratorial world of Leese. By 1960, both were active in the British National Party, founded that year, which had a small following numbering in the hundreds, and whose stated aims included "Liberation of Britain from the Coloured Invasion and Jewish Domination" (BNP 1960: 3). Conspiratorial anti-Semitism was central to this group too, led by a younger generation of British neo-Nazis, now also fuelled by new concerns over black and Asian migration. In 1961, its magazine, *Combat*, produced a supplement on the Eichmann trial, largely written by Jordan, which was one of the first in Britain to engage in Holocaust denial—an emergent trope of neo-Nazism. Jordan claimed that six million Jews had not been killed, and this was mere propaganda created by Jewish interests to increase their influence after 1945. He even asserted that it was Jews who wanted to exterminate Germans (*Combat* 1961b: 3–6). As well as a lead author for this piece, Jordan also penned articles with self-explanatory titles in *Combat*, including "Jewish Economic Conquest" (Jordan 1960), as well as another offering a staunch defence of Rudolf Hess (Jordan 1961c). Such features underscored the ways the British National Party used the trope of conspiring Jews to frame its politics as one radically opposed to mainstream perspectives.

As well as clear endorsements of a Nazi-inspired anti-Jewish conspiracy theory mentality, Jordan's articles in *Combat* articulated the palingenetic vision

of a 'purified' future, once the imagined conspiracy had been overthrown. It idealised what Jordan called "racial nationalism," and proposed the need for a new "Folk State," to supersede the democratic order, deemed "a pernicious fraud," that represented "the will and interests of factions dominated by Jews" (Jordan 1961a: 6). According to these features, "by freeing Britain from alien influence … a Racial Nationalist government will vastly increase real government for Britons" (Jordan 1961b: 6). Specifically, only by removing the alleged Jewish conspirators could this new era emerge. Demonisation of Jews and redemption for Britons were interrelated themes for Jordan.

As part of its activism, the BNP interacted with groups abroad, at camps run by a sister organisation, the Northern European Ring. In these settings, its evocations of the cultic found overt expression. One such camp in 1961, organised by Jordan, attracted a handful of like-minded delegates from Europe and America. *Combat* revelled in reporting that the event was met with a hostile press reaction, highlighting its taboo nature (*Combat* 1961a: 5). The camp itself saw those gathered engage in political rituals as an expression of their worldview: a flag with a Sunwheel emblem was raised at 9.30 am and lowered at 9.30 pm, and later a wooden Sunwheel cross was burned. Delegates also wore Nazi-inspired uniforms. Shortly after this camp, Jordan developed another Nazi-inspired feature: a uniformed, paramilitary elite unit within the BNP called Spearhead. Steeped in neo-Nazi conspiracism, and with taboo symbols and styles drawn from the Nazi era, the 1960s incarnation of the BNP represented a step change in the neo-Nazi cultic milieu of early 1960s Britain.

Variants of this culture became increasingly extreme, albeit highly marginalised as well. By 1962, Jordan and Tyndall broke away from the BNP and formed their own, even more uncompromising organisation, the National Socialist Movement. Symbolically, it was officially launched on April 20, Hitler's birthday. An essay by Jordan in its magazine *The National Socialist* explained the purpose of the NSM was to keep alive faith in Hitler's leadership that appeared to be all but destroyed, which seemed to take extra significance from the seemingly futile nature of the cause:

> In Britain—Britain of all places—the light which Hitler lit is burning, burning brighter, shining out across waters, across the mountains, across the frontiers. National Socialism is back.
>
> JORDAN 1962: 8

Steeped in such language mythologising the Nazi past, during the lifetime of the National Socialist Movement Jordan regularly called his ideals his "creed." In one interview, when asked if he was religious, he explained: "Yes I am, but

not a Christian. National Socialism itself is a faith." When asked if Jesus was a Jew, he added "Some say he was and some say he wasn't" (Levinson and Levinson 1966: 11). The latter was a guarded response, as by the mid 1960s material produced by the NSM was very specific in how its followers should view Christianity. The NSM claimed that Christianity was itself part of Jewish efforts to dominate the modern world, and so words like 'Christmas' should be rejected in favour of terms with an authentic Nordic heritage, such as 'Yuletide'. Unsurprisingly, figures such as Nietzsche were talked about in NSM material and at its events, his ideas seen as a corrective to the influence of Christianity, and useful for reclaiming forgotten Nordic roots. This sort of material should not be dismissed as trivial; it underscores the sustained efforts by the NSM to generate what it saw as an authentic alternative to mainstream religiosity, underpinning its radicalism.

Jordan ran another summer camp, in 1962, and again attracted international delegates. This time they included George Lincoln Rockwell of the American Nazi Party. From the end of the 1950s, Rockwell had developed links with Nazis in Europe, such as Jordan and Bruno Lüdke in Germany, and was interested in creating an international movement to promote neo-Nazi themes.[5] His American Nazi Party was again a small-scale organisation, attracting hundreds, rather than thousands, of supporters. At the summer camp in 1962, he, Jordan and Tyndall launched a new organisation for spreading neo-Nazism across the globe, the World Union of National Socialists (WUNS), with Jordan and Rockwell becoming its leaders. After Jordan went to prison at the end of 1962, Rockwell took charge of this small-scale, transnational neo-Nazi network.

Like Jordan, Rockwell conceived of his neo-Nazism in religious terms, a theme that can be found in his book setting out many of his beliefs, *White Power*. Statements here, presenting Hitler as a 'saviour' figure, evoke the idea of Hitler as a substitute Christ:

> The doctrine of Adolf Hitler was the political salvation of our times, and Adolf Hitler himself the rescuer sent recurrently to a collapsing humanity by an inscrutable Providence. Hitler's and Germany's "crucifixion" was all according to the inevitable workings of this unknowable Scenarist.[6]

Chapters in the book were typical of the ultimate aims and aspirations of the American Nazi Party and its associated organisations such as the WUNS.

5 For an overview of Rockwell, see Simonelli (1999).

6 This book is now widely available online, including http://solargeneral.org/wp-content/uploads/library/white-power-george-lincoln-rockwell.pdf. Accessed 15/08/2016.

One was titled "Spiritual Syphilis," and argued that America was suffering from a "SPIRITUAL failing, a DISEASE of the spirit," and needed to become "spiritually healthy" once more; it grounded such statements with references to Oswald Spengler, whose cyclical theory of history was highly influential to Nazis and so has become of interest to many neo-Nazis too. Another chapter, titled "White Revolution," endorsed Hitler's analysis of Jewish power, claimed America was suffering from a "Black Revolution," and called for a "WHITE REVOLUTION" to overthrow this influence (Rockwell was a fan of using capital letters to emphasise his points). Denouncement of perceived conspiracy, cultic elements, and a vision of redemption for the white race were all combined in Rockwell's agenda. In 1967, a former ANP member shot and killed Rockwell, securing his place as a martyr for the neo-Nazi cause. Shortly before his death, Rockwell changed the name of his party to the National Socialist White People's Party to help it conform to standard naming practice for WUNS affiliated groups.

The WUNS itself grew into a small but ongoing network of micro groups of neo-Nazis in Europe, with active outposts in France, Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, as well as Britain. It was also active in North America, including in the USA and Canada, and in South America, including in Chile and Argentina. The literature of the World Union of National Socialists regularly evoked Nazi-inspired tropes of fighting against a Jewish conspiracy, as well as providing followers with access to an alternative worldview, again steeped in a promise of spiritual salvation. Here, the message was combined with a vision for a new world order of neo-Nazi states. A programme for the network promised that the WUNS would be able to "lift man out of his present unhappy selfishness and into the radiance of self-sacrificing idealism." Hitler himself was described as "the gift of inscrutable Providence," and his "blazing spirit" would allow a new order to arise, "like the early Christians." In such proclamations, the neo-Nazi revolutionary faithful were likened to other types of religious pioneers in earlier times that had created a new way of being. Meanwhile, following the position of Hitler among others, Marxism was described as a religion created by Jewish interests to promote selfishness, while "Jewish manipulations" meant democracies were actually "rotted [*sic*] to the core with corruption" and "weakness." The message that National Socialism was supposed to offer personal, national, and racial redemption was perfectly clear, and the WUNS presented this through the lens of a war of religions between National Socialism and Marxism.[7]

7 "Program of the World Union of National Socialists," Searchlight Archive, SCH/01/Res/INT/01/001.

As it developed, the WUNS network tried to influence its core supporters through a quasi-academic journal as well, *National Socialist World*, edited by William Pierce. The publication featured a wide range of articles, once again evocative of the heterogeneous nature of neo-Nazism, including an essay by another central figure, Savitri Devi, called "The Lightening and the Sun," which typified her idiosyncratic bricolage of Nazi and Hindu themes. (see Goodrick-Clarke 1998). Showing its relevance to confronting a supposed Jewish plot, after explaining the importance of Devi's esoteric approach, Pierce's editorial described the essay as "an important step towards eventually smashing the Jewish blackout" (Pierce 1966: 3–4). Other editions of the journal included essays on the Nazi-era German youth movement, discussion on the 25 Points of the Nazi Party Programme, and an essay by Rockwell's successor as leader of the National Socialist White People's Party, Matt Koehl, titled "Adolf Hitler: German Nationalist or Aryan Racist?" (Koehl 1967: 13–23). After Rockwell's death, the WUNS dwindled, while in Britain another of its leading figures, Jordan, decided to rebrand his activism, and drop open associations with Nazism, a core requirement of membership of the WUNS.

By the end of the 1960s, Rockwell and Jordan had been instrumental in cultivating the neo-Nazi cultic milieu, one with global ambitions and at least some degree of genuine transnational interchange. Both figures promoted not only Nazi-influenced anti-Semitic conspiracism, claiming Jews were involved in a plot that linked global capitalism with Marxism to destroy the Aryan race, but they also drew out elements of religiosity in their activism. They conceived National Socialism in mythic and religious terms, with Hitler as their redeemer figure. Faith in the movement included belief that the future would see a new world order emerge, a narrative of redemption. Jordan re-emerged as an overt neo-Nazi later in life, prompting such ideals again in a clandestine magazine called *Gothic Ripples* from the end of the 1970s to the 2000s, while Rockwell's own legacy as a martyr was to help inspire the activism of a new generation of lifelong National Socialists in America. How did this rekindled neo-Nazi cultic milieu develop from the 1970s to the 1990s, on both sides of the Atlantic?

5 Anti-Semitic Conspiracism in American Neo-Nazism since the 1960s

By the 1970s, the new generation of Nazi-inspired activists in America were making their mark. Since this time, a bewildering and eclectic array of Nazi-inspired groups has emerged in the USA alone. They have developed some

highly idiosyncratic reinterpretations of Nazi themes, such as Ben Klassen's World Church of the Creator, a movement for which Klassen authored a founding text called *White Man's Bible* (Michael 2006). Others more closely linked to the legacy of Rockwell tried to synthesise idealisation of Hitler with religiosity and extreme conspiracy theory views. A standout example is William Pierce's National Alliance, a group whose neo-Nazism combined a novel religion, Cosmotheism (Durham 2004), with more traditional themes of conspiracism and idealisation of Hitler. Pierce's National Alliance became one of the leading US neo-Nazi groups from the 1970s to the early 2000s, yet the organisation has dwindled since his death in 2002. It began life in 1968 as a group called National Youth Alliance, created by Willis Carto of the Liberty Lobby. By 1970, the National Youth Alliance had fragmented, meanwhile Pierce left Koehl's NSWPP, and emerged as a prominent member of National Youth Alliance. By 1974, he was its leader, and simplified its name to National Alliance. His idealisation of a revolution overthrowing an alleged Jewish conspiracy was most fully articulated in fiction, especially in the notorious novel *The Turner Diaries*.

The organisation also published a tabloid, called *Attack!* (renamed *National Vanguard* from 1978), that regularly discussed anti-Semitic conspiracy themes. Typifying its output linking various elements into a holistic evocation of the Jewish conspiracy, one early *Attack!* article, "The Nature of the Beast," focused on explaining how Jews controlled 'the Establishment', especially through the power of the media. It also sought to defend Hitler, and argued that it had been Jewish interests that forced America to enter into war with Germany in 1941, while more recently these same forces governed the media's efforts to demonise anti-Israeli groups in the Middle East region, calling them 'terrorists', thereby influencing American attitudes. Moreover, it explained that, while Jews did not dominate all institutions of the government directly, they controlled them through Jewish-owned newspapers. For example:

> The slanted news in one day's printing of the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* carries more weight than all the memoranda ever issued by all the generals in the Pentagon. Needless to say, both these papers are in the hands of Jewish families.
>
> National Alliance 1970

Highlighting ambiguities in the deployment of influence certainly helps to smooth over the gaps in arguments aiming to show readers how Jews were supposed to control events. Another *Attack!* article, from 1972, implored readers to "clear away the smokescreens and lies" and work out a new perspective,

and so it was up to the reader to "take upon himself the responsibility of fully informing himself." It ended with a short reading list of worthy texts to achieve this goal, including Dietrich Eckart's *Bolshevism from Moses to Lenin*, Werner Sombart's *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* and A.K. Chesterton's *The New Unhappy Lords*, all notorious books articulating conspiratorial anti-Semitism (National Alliance 1972).

Other conspiratorial tropes were clear too. By the end of the 1970s, National Alliance material was promoting what had become standard neo-Nazi themes, such as Holocaust denial. One article from 1979 in *National Vanguard* reflected on Helmut Diwald's revisionist *History of the Germans*, a text much liked by other deniers, such as David Irving, as it claims the numbers killed were much lower than six million, and that extermination was a policy that emerged 'from below' not from Hitler. The article also discussed positively the plight of French denier Robert Faurisson, before concluding it was the hidden aim of Jews to make America feel guilty for not preventing genocide: "The Jews want *both* sympathy and support as a persecuted minority *and* continued influence and privilege as a powerful elite. They cannot have it both ways forever." Optimistically, it concluded the strategy would eventually backfire and "erupt against the Jews" (National Alliance 1979).

As well as offering hope in such ways, conspiracism was combined with evocations of a higher truth within the National Alliance, as Pierce also promoted a unique metaphysical framework. His essay from 1977, "The Path," deemed a classic expression of his Cosmotheism, remains heralded by the current generation of the National Alliance as revelatory—yet is a far less well-remembered element of Piece's influence when compared to *The Turner Diaries*.[8] Some of its opening lines convey the redemptive tenor of this element of the National Alliance's worldview:

> We show you the meaning and the purpose of things. We lead you from confusion and uncertainty to knowledge; from weakness to strength; from frustrated desire to fulfillment.
> We lead you to the Path of Life. We bring your souls into harmony, with the Spirit of All Things.
> We give you the Truth, which is this: There is but one Reality, and that Reality is the Whole. It is the Creator, the Self-Created.

8 A more recent National Alliance discussion on "The Path," along with the full text of the article with two more that made up the 'Cosmotheist Trilogy' are available at http://national-vanguard.org/2015/02/cosmotheism-the-path-updated/ Accessed: 15/08/2016.

The text was ambiguously and poetically worded, but essentially proposed the existence of a 'Divine Creator' who mankind either served as a 'sub-man', ignorant of this higher purpose, or as a 'sighted man' possessing 'Divine Consciousness'. For those who attained this higher state, their life could continue after death, becoming part of a 'Community of Divine Consciousness'. As "The Path" concluded:

> Enter now into the Cosmotheist Community. Partake of our joyful certainty that the Creator's Purpose will be fulfilled. Lay with us the foundations for the new order of things, which will rise in the place of the old … Strive with us toward membership in the Community of the Awakened.

For the committed, the National Alliance offered more than an explanation of why the movement remained marginalised, as a consequence of the conspiring forces its literature often decried; it also offered an alternate way of being for those who wanted to follow Pierce's 'Path'.

Pierce certainly was not the only figure to promote this type of ontological component as part of a neo-Nazi agenda. Another figure to move through the American Nazi Party, and then develop his own movement, was James K. Warner. A founding member of the ANP, Warner was then active in the National States Rights Party. He became influenced by the ideas of Wesley Swift, an early Christian Identity ideologue, and founded his New Christian Crusade Church in 1970. This was one of many variants of the nebulous Christian Identity movement that emerged in post-war America, and which is often sympathetic to Nazi ideas (Berlet 2004). Its various incarnations from the 1950s onwards have fused an esoteric variant of Christianity, British Israelism, with anti-Semitic and racist themes to promote the idea of Aryan supremacy (Barkun 1997). Believers in the faith tend to think that only white people are descendants from Adam and Eve, while other racial groups are supposedly descended from pre-Adamic people. Hitler is also heroised as one of the leading figures to have both celebrated the white race, and fought for its defence.

During the 1970s, Warner's Christian Identity group, the New Christian Crusade Church, published a regular newspaper, *Christian Vanguard*, articulating some quite typical themes, once again synthesising anti-Semitic conspiracism and the cultic dimension of neo-Nazism. Here, Jewish people were again deemed racially sub-human, though via a language drawn from Christianity. Notably, *Christian Vanguard* included discussion on the need to reclaim Jesus from a false Jewish identity—very different in tenor when compared to Pierce's Cosmotheism. One article from 1976, "Jesus Was Not Jew" (Poriro 1976), was unequivocal: "it is about time that the Christian people awaken to the fact that

they have been brain washed by the Jews … to the falsehood that Jesus was a Jew." Here, specifically theological justification explained why Jews were racially inferior: "NO RACIAL JEW IS AN ISRAELITE … The Bible itself identifies the Jews as the seed of Cain thereby identifying Satan as their father." Aside from placing Jews as descendants of the devil, an image accompanied the feature describing how most artistic representations of Jesus made him look Jewish, all part of a Jewish 'big lie' technique to dupe gullible Christians (Poriro 1976: 1). In such ways, *Christian Vanguard* was steeped in a discourse fusing its sense of a Christian religiosity with its conspiracism. Another edition of *Christian Vanguard* shows how the Jews were used to epitomise the existential threat deemed to be posed. It featured an editorial called "This Time The World," again stressing that Zionism and Communism were two international movements that were controlled by Jews "to set up a one-world order run by them alone" (*Christian Vanguard* 1974). It continued that Jews had the upper hand as they operated internationally, while patriots opposing them had tended to fight their battles only on a national level. It called for greater international unity and cooperation between white patriots across the globe, to combat the alleged growth of Jewish power (*Christian Vanguard* 1974).

Warner's New Christian Crusade Church epitomises the much wider and more complex phenomenon of Christian Identity, which has clear neo-Nazi elements. Since the 1970s, it has grown into a movement with membership numbers fluctuating between 25,000 and 50,000, according to the Anti-Defamation League.[9] It was Richard Butler who created the Christian Identity movement's most notorious organisation, Aryan Nations, in 1977 at a base in Hayden Lake, Idaho. This was a group that again combined various neo-Nazi themes in its activities, and attracted the attention of many high-profile American neo-Nazis, including Tom Metzger, Don Black, and David Lane. The latter is yet another example of the combination of anti-Semitic conspiracism and the promotion of the cultic elements within neo-Nazi cultures.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Lane drifted through various extreme-right organisations, including the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan, as well as the Christian Identity movement, becoming its Colorado State Organiser by the early 1980s. His endorsement of Nazi themes is clear. For example he regularly claimed that *Mein Kampf* was required reading. Along with other standout members such as Robert Matthews, Lane helped to found the terrorist group the Brüder Schweigen (Silent Brotherhood) in 1983. A year later, the group murdered the Jewish radio talk show host Alan Berg; other activities encompassed

9 Anti-Defamation League, "Christian Identity," at http://archive.adl.org/learn/ext_us/christian_identity.html. Accessed 15/08/2016.

carrying out a string of robberies, with funds gained being distributed to other neo-Nazi inspired groups, including Pierce's National Alliance. Matthews was killed in a shootout, and has since become another neo-Nazi martyr figure. For his part in the group, Lane was sentenced to 190 years in prison. During his time in prison, he developed a series of writings that typified the neo-Nazi combination of anti-Semitic conspiracism and an engagement with religious themes and a vision for redemption.

In particular, Lane created his own alternate religious system, an 'Aryanised' type of paganism that he called Wotanism, although it was also influenced by some biblical texts (Michael 2009). This drew on the ideas of Carl Jung, such as his 1936 essay "Wotan," though the term Wotan for Lane stood for "Will of the Aryan People." He promoted Wotanism through a newsletter he was able to publish from prison, *Focus Fourteen*, as well as through a printing press, 14 Words Press, based in Idaho, that he established with his wife and Ron McVan, and he became an ideologue who developed an impressive level of international recognition. His ideas were crystallised in a notorious slogan, 'The 14 Words' ("We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children"), which he coined as a summary of an 88-word piece of text found in Chapter 8 of *Mein Kampf*. The numbers 14 and 88 are important neo-Nazi codes, the latter also standing for 'Heil Hitler'. Though primarily used as slogans, they can have a more overtly religious meaning for those more familiar with Lane's ideas. Lane also wrote an essay called the "88 Precepts," styled as the basic principles of Wotanism. Given his background in the Christian Identity movement, it is also revealing to see Lane had an ambivalent attitude to the Bible, while primarily promoting a variant of paganism. For him, the "Wotan is the best blended representation of Allfather, the Creative force, and folkish needs for the White race today. Wotan awakens our racial soul and genetic memory. He stirs our blood" (Lane 1999: 87). Despite this, Lane wanted to talk to those interested in Christian Identity and draw them to his own worldview.

To achieve this, Lane's Wotanism ideas saw value in parts of the Bible. In another essay he clarified a key distinction: "In my opinion there is a way to use the Old Testament within a White racial religion … but the New Testament is racial suicide" (1999: 401). In essence, he used the King James Version to explore what he called the "Pyramid Prophecy." Again, the numbers 14 and 88 were crucial to uncovering a secret message, while the words 'Jesus' and 'Jesus Christ' were mere code terms according to Lane. The Pyramid Prophecy was also important as it offered further confirmation of his alternative religious beliefs. While esoteric re-readings of parts of the Bible were part of the vision, the trope of anti-Semitic conspiracism was also crucial for Lane. Another of his

central texts, the "White Genocide Manifesto," argued—again over 14 points—that white people were under threat from Jews, a claim summarised in point seven as follows: "all Western nations are ruled by a Zionist conspiracy to mix, overrun and exterminate the White race" (Lane 1999: 4). Though Lane's combination of tropes of anti-Semitic conspiracy, religiosity, and a vision of redemption for white people was unique, once again these underlying elements do combine in his worldview.

Men such as Lane, Warner, and Pierce represent some of the leading neo-Nazi figures in post-war America. Each was influenced by the American Nazi Party of the 1960s, and the legacy of Rockwell. In quite different ways, they combined anti-Semitic conspiracism with the cultivation of the Nazi-inspired religion that claimed to offer a connection to a higher truth. Their contributions to the neo-Nazi cultic milieu had international impact, including on British neo-Nazism. How did British outposts of the neo-Nazi cultic milieu respond to the development of such trends from the 1970s?

6 Anti-Semitic Conspiracism in British Neo-Nazism Since the 1960s

Building on the energies of figures like Jordan in the 1960s, many British activists between the 1960s and the 1990s developed their own variants of anti-Semitic conspiracism. Their environment was quite different to America's. In the UK, the National Front was founded in 1967 and, in part as a result of the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968, decided to present itself as a mass movement, and so limited its overt neo-Nazi profile. Nevertheless, between 1967 and 1979, two of its Chairmen, A.K. Chesterton and John Tyndall, were relatively overt in their promotion of conspiratorial anti-Semitism, though denied overt links to Nazism itself that many anti-fascists of the period often identified. Even Colin Jordan's more extreme British Movement tried to eschew a neo-Nazi identity in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nevertheless, the trend of neo-Nazi organisations cultivating a cultic idiom steeped in anti-Semitism and idealisation of the Nazi regime can be seen in many of the smaller, fringe groups that emerged from the later 1960s onwards.

Examples of these smaller outfits included the National Socialist Group, active from 1968 to 1969. Run by David Courtney and influenced by Jordan, it tried to offer activists a National Socialist culture, as well as politics. Its members took part in ritualised politics, including signing orders in their own blood, engaging in Nazi-influenced parades (in a back garden), and defining their actions through idealisation of Hitler. The tiny group soon ceased activity when the security services became concerned about its attempts to develop

paramilitary training activities in 1969. Its first "Directive" document noted that it was created in Year of the Führer 79, and explained that "We, the executive of the N.S.G., believe that the creed of National Socialism must be upheld and developed," and quoted a passage from *Mein Kampf* (NSG 1968: 1). Some activists within the NSG who wanted to continue their activism later joined another clandestine, neo-Nazi group of 1970s Britain, Column 88. By the mid 1970s, Column 88 was engaged in both aggressive acts and pagan-influenced rituals, including one at Stonehenge on Hitler's birthday in 1974 (*Searchlight* 1975a: 3–6). Another clandestine neo-Nazi group that developed in 1970s Britain was the League of St. George. Telling of ongoing Anglo-American linkages, Edward R. Fields, leader of the American neo-Nazi group the National States Rights Party, came to London to address one of their meetings in 1975 (*Searchlight* 1975b). Meanwhile, its publication *League Review* could be positive towards other elements of the neo-Nazi milieu in America. For example, commenting on Warner's *Christian Vanguard* it noted:

> The *Christian Vanguard* … serves as an organ for the Identity Movement, the Movement which exposes the Jews as the children of Satan and proclaims the White Race to be true Israel. The *C.V.* offers an answer to the Judeo-Masonic "social gospel" spewed forth by the modern churches and opposes the Jews … the real credit for the Vanguard's excellent quality is Dr. James K. Warner.
>
> *Searchlight* 1977

In such ways, America's culture of neo-Nazism that fused reinterpretations of neo-Nazism with a 'higher', ostensibly Christian cause was relevant and helpful to Britain's clandestine neo-Nazis of the 1970s.

By the early 1980s, Britain's extreme right milieu became more fragmented once again, as the National Front split into various factions following failure to 'break through' in the 1979 General Election. In 1982, Tyndall founded a new British National Party. As it broke into various offshoots, some elements of the National Front during the 1980s veered into developing their own variants of cultic expression of their beliefs, combined with Nazi-style anti-Semitic conspiracism. This included a faction led by Nick Griffin, Patrick Harrington, and Derek Holland that fetishised what it called the 'Political Soldier', an idealised spiritual warrior willing to fight for the preservation of the white race. Here, the references were more overtly European. In particular, the concept was founded on idealisation of figures such as Michael Corneliu Codreanu, an interwar Romanian fascist and leader of the Legion of the Archangel, a group steeped in Romanian Orthodox Christianity; and the ideas of the Italian

philosopher and fascist sympathiser, Julius Evola. The latter's thoughts on modern man needing to rediscover 'Tradition' have also been utilised by far-right terrorism in Italy in the 1970s. Overt Nazi influences were less clear here, though still present.

Holland wrote a manifesto for the tiny Political Soldier movement in 1984, which again underscored the way it promoted a variant of the neo-Nazi cultic milieu. This explained "the Political Soldier must undergo a Spiritual Revolution, an inner revolution which guides, directs and pervades his life," all necessary to bring about the new way of being that would be able to usher in the new order. It described those they opposed as follows: "The ranks of our enemies are immense: the banks, the Communists, the Freemasons, the Zionists, the Capitalists." The closing passages of Holland's booklet also clarified it offered a "spiritually motivated world view." While anti-Semitism was less overt, these Political Soldiers of the 1980s promoted the destruction of Israel by supporting the total victory of Palestinians opposing the Jewish state. They also explained how the banking system was "corrupting modern man." Within the context of British neo-Nazi cultures of this type, this was quite a clear, though coded, anti-Semitic statement evoking the idea of Jews controlling international finance.[10]

The Political Soldiers have become one among many unique variants of Nazi-influenced ideologies to develop in Britain. Links between British and American neo-Nazism continued into the 1990s. These connections again help to draw out some of the nuances within this cultic milieu. One avenue where the British culture became particularly innovative in this period was in the White Power music scene, fostered from the late 1970s in the UK, and later defined by British organisations such as Blood & Honour. Ian Stuart Donaldson founded the B&H network in 1987, and died in a car crash in 1992. Many in the movement have deemed this a state-organised assassination. Donaldson has since become a martyr for neo-Nazis across the globe, and his nebulous Blood & Honour network has diversified into a loose, fragmented transnational network (Jackson 2012). The cultic, a sense of mission, and conspiracism are often found within this White Power music context.

This can be seen in magazines linked to the White Power music scene that play with such heroised and 'legendary' figures like Donaldson to create a cultic idiom, such as *Final Conflict*, a fanzine that began in 1992. The publication's name was supposed to be an evocation of Holland's Political Soldier concept (Shekhovtsov 2011), while the third edition showed overt endorsement for US neo-Nazism, describing Robert Matthews of the Silent Brotherhood on its

10 Derek Holland, "Political Soldier" reproduced online at http://www.gornahoor.net/library/PoliticalSoldierA4.pdf. Accessed 15/08/2016.

front cover as a martyr: "Robert died at the hands of the Zionist state he tried to overthrow." It added "[w]here one warrior falls one-hundred shall spring from the shadows to take his place" (*Final Conflict* 1992: 1). Inside, an essay on Matthews again styled him as a martyr, explaining to UK readers how he joined the Aryan Nations group but also read material from the National Alliance that was "heavily influenced by the 'superman' ideas of Nietzsche." It concluded: "HAIL BOB MATTHEWS! HAIL THE ORDER!" (8–9). In the language of *Final Conflict*, Matthews was a revolutionary martyr who died for his cause, and so his death should inspire others to believe in this mission too.

Holocaust denial was also an ongoing part of the picture of those promoting the idea of a Jewish conspiracy in Britain. In 1991, an edition of the League of St. George's retitled magazine *League Sentinel* reported on the continuing dynamism within the Holocaust denial fraternity, noting that British denier David Irving was able to bring Robert Faurrison and even Fred Leuchter to Britain, the latter formally banned from entering the country by the Home Secretary. The cover of this edition of the *League Sentinel* demonstrated another example of conspiracy theory thinking, with a headline reading "Maxwell Death: Was Mossad Responsible?" alongside a picture of the recently deceased Robert Maxwell. Conspiracies could be seen in many places, though the reference to Mossad highlights who *League Sentinel* were alluding to.

Anti-Semitic conspiracism was manifest at other times in the 1990s. Later in the decade, Nick Griffin was convicted of publishing Holocaust denial material in a BNP-linked magazine he edited, *The Rune*. The magazine had described the Holocaust as the "Holohoax," while Faurrison even appeared at Griffin's trial, in 1998, as a witness for the defence (*Searchlight* 1998: 6–8). Griffin was also closely involved in another notorious conspiracy theory text from the BNP in the later 1990s, *Who are the Mind-benders?* (Griffin 1997; see Copsey 2008: 71–72). The introductory essay quoted Pierce at length, where he was styled as a man who had seen through Jewish conspiracy and had rightly suggested that the Jewish-controlled media used racism to denigrate white people while also wilfully failing to report any negative details on black and Asian people. The essay culminated with its main argument: "members of the Jewish community … exercise a power and influence in Britain's mass media that are out of all proportion to their number in the population." Specifically, Jewish interests were seen as acting to "weaken the national spirit and national pride of the British people" (Griffin 1997: 2–5). Spiritual decline and a Jewish conspiracy were presented as interlinked forces.

The influence of Pierce in the UK occurred in other ways too. In November 1995, he visited the country and addressed the BNP's annual rally. Pierce had also helped to inspire a faction that emerged within the BNP, before breaking

away to become a discrete, hardline, and anti-BNP group, Combat 18. His address in 1995 was designed by Tyndall to draw away support from Combat 18. In terms of Combat 18 itself, some of its own material represents the overtly violent end of the neo-Nazi cultic milieu. For example, one edition of its magazine *The Stormer* evoked many of the group's most extreme themes. A column signed J. Streicher (a reference to the major Nazi propagandist who published a magazine called *Der Stürmer*) commented positively on the Oklahoma bombing of 1995, noting "this ZOG [Zionist Occupational Government] building housed those responsible for the murder of 'Bob Matthews'." Elsewhere, a more aggressive tenor was underscored by some 'poetic' text that read:

> A STORM IS COMING. IT SHALL REIGN 'DEATH AND DESTRUCTION'.
> THEIR DEATH, THEIR DESTRUCTION. THIS STORM IS 'WHITE REVOLUTION'.
> BOMBS SHALL BE ITS THUNDER AND BULLETS ITS RAIN.

Effectively inciting violence, this was followed by the names and addresses of two left-wing activists and a Jewish centre (Streicher n.d.: 5). Later in the magazine, a page gave details on digging up Jewish graves, complete with relevant addresses and telephone numbers for cemeteries and synagogues. The statement "ZYKLON-B OVER SIX MILLION SATISFIED CUSTOMERS" was also written on the same page, above a swastika and next to more names and addresses of synagogues. Apart from obviously being deeply offensive, the statement is actually quite atypical as it endorses rather than denies the Holocaust.

Finally, the National Alliance itself was a group that Britain's neo-Nazi cultic milieu of the 1990s sought to recreate, quite literally. Run by Paul Jeffries, the British National Alliance's magazine, *The Oak*, published essays on fermenting revolution in Britain, combined with reprinted material from America. Its pages featured material promoting violence, including from Pierce himself commenting on the corruption of the political and cultural mainstream as a consequence of a Jewish conspiracy. Yet here too there was a further variant of juxtaposing a sense of enmity towards Jewish people with an evocation of the higher cause that the movement sought to promote. It also featured the American National Alliance's life rune logo on the cover. Explaining its use of the life rune symbol, it stated:

> It comes from an ancient alphabet, or futhark, used in Northern Europe for many centuries before the general adoption of the Roman alphabet there. The Life Rune signifies life, creation, birth, rebirth and renewal. It

> expresses in a single symbol the raison d'etre of the National Alliance and the movement of Aryan renewal. (*The Oak*)

Rebirth, religiosity, and anti-Semitic tropes all combine in such evocative statements that also highlight the links British and American neo-Nazism.

7 Conclusion: Final Reflections on the Religious Nature of Neo-Nazi Conspiracy Theories

This chapter has explored various expressions of British and America neo-Nazi culture. The ideas and activism of groups examined in this survey are heterogeneous, yet also they define themselves by expressing some quite similar, underlying tropes which gives them a degree of compatibility: a belief in redemption for the white or Aryan race, and declaiming forms of conspiratorial anti-Semitism. These themes are intimately related issues for neo-Nazi activists—or at least the movement's vocal ideologues and publicists—and so recognising how they relate helps explain how people drawn to neo-Nazi milieus perceive the world around them.

Discussion on the recent literature on conspiracy theories, religion, and the cultic milieu at the beginning of the chapter suggested that it is valid to examine conspiracy theories as sometimes possessing a religious dynamic. They require a sense of belief, as they cannot be proved empirically. As such, conspiracies are based on holistic, rather than analytical, thinking. This approach relates to some similar debates within fascism studies, which have become concerned with the ontological dynamics that fascist cultures can evoke for those attracted to them. Bringing these two areas of debate together helps understand the appeal of neo-Nazi cultures. They are part of what Campbell calls the cultic milieu, albeit an extreme variant of it. Moreover, for those who believe in conspiracies focused on demonising Jewish people to the point where they become deemed existential threats, as is the case with neo-Nazism, faith in the conspiracy and faith in the aims of the movement can become closely intertwined. Specifically, conspiracy theories from neo-Nazi ideologues—who think of their movement as revolutionary—are crucial in developing narratives of redemption. They do this by imagining an alternate future, one where conspiratorial forces linked to evocations of such a hated force no longer wield power. As the conspiracy theory frames Jewish people as an existential threat, they can also, in more or less overt ways, become evocations of 'evil'. Conversely, neo-Nazis can then think of their own activities as fighting against such 'evil', and so therefore are 'good'.

The chapter has shown that leading neo-Nazis, from early pioneers such as Colin Jordan and Lincoln Rockwell, to more recent iconoclastic figures such as David Lane and William Pierce, have repeatedly claimed that a spiritual and redemptive component legitimised their activism, in one way or another. Yet their various articulations of this synthesis of tropes were quite divergent, and any good history of this phenomenon needs to acknowledge heterogeneity in neo-Nazi culture. This need to recognise divergent articulations of neo-Nazism was also clearly expressed in the ideal type for neo-Nazism set out at the start of the chapter.

Reflecting on some of the differences between British and American contexts examined here, it certainly seems American neo-Nazis have been particularly effective in developing new religions as part of their practice. Pierce and Lane, among others, have reworked spiritual and pagan ideas to create new religions that offer quite novel ways to believe in Hitler's cause. In a different tenor, the Christian Identity movement has also achieved this by reworking Christian ideas. This milieu has been influential outside America, while generations of British activists have also sought legitimisation of their own variants of neo-Nazism by turning to similar tropes. British neo-Nazi groups have been far more marginal, and small-scale in nature. Highlighting the interconnected, transnational nature of neo-Nazism, British groups have drawn on high profile figures within the American milieu, as well as European Christian fascists such as Codreanu, and more ambiguous European fascist thinkers, such as Evola. Despite a high degree of divergence, these ideologues can find common ground on themes of white superiority and denouncing alleged Jewish conspiracism. For those within the movement, even when articulated using differing intellectual reference points, there remains a clear family resemblance within this milieu, giving quite incompatible ideas a sense of common cause.

For those who want to understand the ideas of disparate figures, from lifelong activists such as William Pierce, to figures more concerned with developing Nazi-inspired, cultural production such as Ian Stuart Donaldson, to contemporary neo-Nazi terrorists such as Thomas Mair, this chapter hopefully offers some useful observations. Focusing on how those within the movement utilise the nexus between conspiracism, faith, and a sense of connecting with an alternate way of being is far more likely to yield meaningful answers as to what drove such divergent neo-Nazis than simply commenting on the ways such figures were also steeped in a politics of hatred. Finally, in the era of the Internet, divergent forms of neo-Nazism—promoted in the UK by groups such as National Action and in America by phenomena such as the so-called alt-right—will likely continue to offer an outlook founded on anti-Semitic con-

spiracy theories and the promise of accessing 'higher' truths and a vision of redemption. For people who are looking for frameworks for a fundamental rejection of the political and cultural mainstream, and who are intuitively drawn to the holistic, alternate worldviews of the cultic milieu, neo-Nazism will continue to have an appeal as a rich, alternate world that can explain to those looking for such answers what is 'really' going on.

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CHAPTER 22

Evil Cult or Persecuted Minority? Conspiracy Theories Surrounding Falun Gong and the Government of the People's Republic of China

Helen Farley

1 Introduction

Claims and counterclaims characterise the debate around Falun Gong and its relationship with the government of the People's Republic of China. Elegant conspiracy theories are articulated by those promoting either side of the argument, each side able to trot out a seemingly endless procession of impassioned witnesses and advocates ready to support whatever view is being expressed. As is characteristic of most conspiracy theories, each party presents an alternative narrative, making a claim to rationality and legitimacy while presenting the 'other' as irrational and illegitimate (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2017). For academics attempting to unravel the rhetoric, scholarly research about Falun Gong has been severely hampered by the dearth of sources written by independent third parties, uninvolved with the situation (Noakes and Ford 2015). The most that can be said by researchers is that the information presented is contested (for example, see Farley 2013). Those sources that do exist have been crafted by Falun Gong practitioners, agents of the Chinese government, or the media (and aligned with or informed by either side). Renowned Falun Gong scholar David Ownby declined to use the materials proffered as evidence of persecution by Falun Gong practitioners as they were not clear about how the data was gathered and analysed. This stance has been followed by other scholars in the field (for example, Lin 2016). The situation is complicated by the fact that the Chinese government has consistently refused to allow scholars to independently investigate the treatment of Falun Gong adherents within China (Li 2014).

For their part, Falun Gong advocates are making claims of systematic detention, torture, execution, and organ harvesting by the government of the People's Republic of China (for example, see Falun Dafa 2017; Phillips 2017; Greenlee 2006). They frame their persecution in terms of a human rights abuse to a Western audience that is highly sympathetic to such claims and is inclined to believe that the Chinese government is capable of such atrocities (Aldrich

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et al. 2015). The government of the People's Republic of China continues to argue that Falun Gong is an evil cult, likening it to other notorious cults such Aum Shinrikyo (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, n.d.(a)), further claiming that it coerces its members into performing illegal activities (Ross 2009). They call its founder, Li Hongzhi, a pathological liar who proffers fallacies to deceive his followers and the general public (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, n.d. (a)). In the West, there is a strong suspicion of cults (Pfeifer 2016), which the government of China is seeking to exploit in its crusade against Falun Gong. The situation is compounded by the bizarre theology underpinning Falun Gong, populated by shapeshifting aliens and numerous other-Earthly dimensions linked with socially conservative views around sexuality and interracial relationships (Farley 2010).

The media and the sophisticated Falun Gong publicity machine have ensured that most thoughtful citizens in the West are familiar with (and appropriately outraged) by China's persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China. The intent behind this strategy is to ensure that there is sufficient international pressure to force China into easing the persecution (Greenlee 2006). Those same people in the West who are so passionately and vocally opposed to the movement's suppression, remain largely unaware of the ideologies that lie behind Falun Gong; of those beliefs that make Falun Gong tick, even though they are well-documented and readily accessible (Farley 2010). The Chinese government has sought to counter these efforts in part through the subtle pressures applied via its Confucius Institute project active in prestigious universities in 120 countries around the globe (Tin-yau Lo and Pan 2016). Recently, in Australia, investigative journalists have uncovered a systematic approach by the government of China to exert 'soft power' over that country's government in an effort to quash dissent (McKenzie *et al.* 2017).

For now, the West may have averted its gaze; after all, the most startling events of the battle between the superpower and Falun Gong took place well over a decade ago. However, the animosity remains amid claims of continued persecution from Falun Gong adherents and accusations of evildoing by the Chinese government. Falun Gong continues to thrive outside of China, and adherents use their freedom of speech to pursue their protests but also to offer information and support to those practitioners still resident in China (Greenlee 2006). In the propaganda promulgated by both sides, the truth espoused by psychologist Serge Moscovici (1987) is evident: neither logical contradiction nor factual proof will deter those that cling so tightly to a conspiracy theory. With both sides steadfastly holding their conspiracy theories close, it becomes nigh on impossible for an outside party to completely discern the truth.

This chapter explores the claims and counterclaims made by Falun Gong and the government of the People's Republic of China in relation to each other. It begins with an examination of the origins of Falun Gong and some of its basic tenets. It further explores the events leading up to the government of the People's Republic of China banning that organisation in China in October 1999. A number of the specific conspiracy theories proffered by either side are examined, together with a discussion of the likely veracity of those accounts, including the author's unwitting role in the narrative.

2 The Birth of Falun Gong

The emergence of medical science in China towards the close of the nineteenth century was set against the backdrop of a certain romanticism of science. Many hoped this Western science would lead the country into more prosperous times while holding back the dark dread of superstition. Among China's intellectuals, the idea of taking a core of traditional culture and encircling it with a protective shell of Western science was beguiling (Ownby 2008). Even though traditional Chinese medicine was integral to this core, there was not a standardised Chinese medicine curriculum to be completed by aspiring doctors before entering practice. Furthermore, Chinese medicine was considered to be useless for the prevention of disease or for ensuring the well-being of China's beleaguered population (Ownby 2008).

The overwhelming inertia of traditional culture was widely viewed as the reason that China was failing to modernise and consequently, traditional Chinese medicine dropped out of favour. With the collapse of the Republic of China (occupying modern day China, Taiwan, and Mongolia) in the first two decades of the twentieth century, science gained an importance previously unknown in China. It was viewed as being the saviour that would rescue the country from its enemies and from itself. It was in this context that Western medicine began to emerge as the favoured paradigm (Ownby 2008). Though the efficacy of Western medicine was recognised, the reality of making it available to a population suspicious of change, under resourced, and largely still living a poor, rural existence was unrealised. The population was inadequately serviced by doctors practising Western medicine; with just one doctor for every 26,000 people (Palmer 2007).

Just a scant few years before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a group of communist cadres in the South Hebei Liberated Zone revived an ancient technique that could inexpensively bring health and vitality to the impoverished masses. It consisted of a set of exercises that required

simply that a person stand still for thirty minutes every day, controlling the breath, concentrating on the specific acupoints at the centre of the soles of the feet and repeating the simple mantra: "My organs move. My mind is still." The cadres called this system of sitting, lying, and stretching exercises, "qigong" (Ownby 2008; Farley 2010). These techniques were reformulated and institutionalised such that they were removed from their religious and 'feudal' contexts (Palmer 2007, 2008).

Qigong is an integrated system of practices intended for improving and maintaining good health and based on ideas found in traditional Chinese medicine. The word, 'Qi' has been translated as 'vital energy' with 'gong' purported to mean 'skill', so 'qigong' becomes the skill of developing vital energy so as to promote health and well-being (Xu 1999; Rahn 2002). The techniques were part of a fabricated tradition that became standardised for use in a modern, secular state. The exercises were described from a purely technical angle and categorised according to a rational schema (Palmer 2007).

Until 1959, focused qigong institutions were established and grew rapidly, assisted by a political turn against Western medicine and from the exponential growth in Chinese medicine. The Great Leap Forward, from 1959 to 1961, favoured the large-scale dissemination of qigong (Palmer 2008). The years 1962 to 1964 saw a decline in activity, largely due to factional politics—its greatest supporters were perceived as abusing qigong as charlatans (Ownby 2008)—until qigong was banned preceding the Cultural Revolution in the mid 1960s (Palmer 2007). There was no officially sanctioned qigong from 1965 until its rehabilitation in 1978. This revitalisation began with Guo Lin, a female artist from Guangdong province, who used qigong to cure herself of cancer during the 1960s. She subsequently risked persecution by teaching qigong to other people living with cancer, in parks within Beijing (Ownby 2008). Her 'New Qigong Therapy' inaugurated a novel form of teaching and practice that was embraced by qigong masters. Guo introduced group practice in parks; bringing qigong out of the medical institutes. Followers led free collective sessions in public spaces, removing the necessity for traditional masters to give secret initiations or for medical workers to provide one-on-one clinical instruction. Her method brought new excitement to qigong at the end of the 1970s and significantly contributed to the qigong wave of the 1980s (Palmer 2007). The qigong boom swept China as a mass popular religious movement (Ownby 2008), becoming an outlet for a cultural shift from political utopianism to individual empowerment and subjectivity. It was often expressed in religious terms and symbolism within the state (Palmer 2007).

Falun Gong, or Falun Dafa as it later became known, is a movement that arose in the context of the qigong boom of the 1980s in the People's Republic of

China (Ownby 2003). 'Qigong Fever' was the name given to this phenomenon that saw over one hundred million practitioners—around twenty per cent of China's urban population—practising the breathing and meditation techniques that characterised qigong (Palmer 2007, 2008; Li 2014). By 1991, qigong had attracted much criticism and was regarded with cynicism because it was associated with primitive superstition and religion in a society desperately embracing scientific rationalism and trying to distance itself from a 'superstitious' past (Farley 2013). The government of the People's Republic of China began to monitor the self-proclaimed qigong masters, the attendant literature, and ultimately the qigong organisations themselves with the aim of uncovering 'false' or 'unscientific' qigong (Ownby 2008; Chen 2003).

Falun Gong first appeared in the broad landscape of Chinese religion in 1992, founded by the charismatic and enigmatic Li Hongzhi, amid this widespread disenchantment with qigong (Ownby 2000; Palmer 2007; Penny 2012). Feeling uncomfortable under the scrutiny of the Chinese government, Li Hongzhi began to draw a distinction between Falun Gong and qigong by insisting that the aim of Falun Gong was not the cultivation of 'extraordinary powers' such as clairvoyance or supernatural healing, which had become the focus of much qigong practice. He further emphasised that neither was it about the acquisition of good health, though this was certainly a consequence of rigorous practice. In marked contrast to qigong, Li claimed that the aim of Falun Gong was spiritual salvation (Lu 2005; Palmer 2007).

The very earliest writings about qigong described body postures and associated techniques, but they almost without exception contained little content concerning morality (Ownby 2000). By way of contrast, the writings of Li Hongzhi provided plenty of moral content to accompany the descriptions of exercises and practices (Ownby 2000). Supporters of both Falun Gong and qigong were equally insistent in their protests that the two sets of practices bore no relationship to each other. Though there can be no plausible denial that Falun Gong borrowed from the ideas and practices of qigong, Falun Gong has developed particular exercises and ideologies that differentiate it from the former (Irons 2003; Palmer 2007). Even so, Falun Gong emerged as a qigong method, and in its fledgeling years, the relationship between the two movements was close (Palmer 2007).

Though this separation was mutually acknowledged, in 1992, Li purportedly travelled to Beijing to a group at the China Qigong Scientific Research Society to participate in research activities (Tong 2009). Li and his associates, Li Chang, Wang Zhiwen, and Yu Changxi, established the Falun Gong Research Society not long afterwards. Accreditation soon followed, and the new organisation became recognised as a branch of the larger organisation, which in turn

promoted Falun Gong training sessions (Tong 2002). Li left China in 1994, and subsequently these sessions ceased. Falun Gong sources claimed that the discontinuation of these meetings allowed Li to concentrate on his Buddhism studies. It is probable that his leaving was due to mounting opposition from within the Communist Party and the Chinese government (Ownby 2008). For about twenty years, in the face of considerable scepticism, qigong successfully defined itself and was generally recognised as pertaining to health, science, and sports; certainly not religion or superstition (Palmer 2007). However, the scepticism about and the criticisms of qigong, and hence Falun Gong, became too difficult to contain; the Chinese government more vigorously policed qigong masters, associated literature, and qigong organisations, aiming to uncover 'false' or 'unscientific' qigong (Chen 2003).

Falun Gong had attracted many millions of followers drawn in by the marked lack of admission criteria, no fees for membership, relatively straightforward exercises, and the promise of health and redemption (Farley 2013; Chang 2004; Irons 2003; Penny 2012). In 1996, Li Hongzhi left China permanently for the United States, just one step ahead of government agents. He moved to New York from where he actively directed Falun Gong's operations (Burgdoff 2003).

2.1 *What is Falun Gong?*

Li Hongzhi claimed to use telekinetic energy to position the 'falun' or the 'wheel of the law' into the abdomens of Falun Gong adherents (Hongzhi 1999). He further asserted that the turning of this wheel ejected negative energy, with the generation of positive energy, in turn, ensuring good health and the absence of disease (Fisher 2003; Palmer 2003). For the wheel to keep turning, adherents must routinely perform the five meditative exercises characteristic of Falun Gong, thereby removing any accretion of bad karma, which he described as being black and sticky (Thornton 2005). To further support this cultivation, Li apparently directed 'law bodies' or 'fashen' which are complete, independent, and realistic individuals who are flexible and invisible. It is said that he leads the fashen to protect and heal those of his followers who are suffering from illness. Those practitioners intent on adhering to the tenets of Falun Gong must uphold the purity of their devotion by withdrawing from any other sort of spiritual practice. Those adherents who are singularly diligent must also avoid reading about or contemplating other forms of spirituality to prevent any deformation of the rotating dharma wheel (Lu 2005).

Falun Gong is the uneasy fusion of diverse constituents of several preexisting traditions, specifically Taoism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk religion (Thornton 2005; Lu 2005). The breathing and meditative aspects of Falun Gong closely resemble those used by Taoists to increase potency and longevity

(Chang 2004). Even so, by way of contrast, there are numerous references to UFOs and science, giving the movement a contemporary veneer (Ackerman 2005). The extensive use of modern communication technologies including email and the Internet to spread its doctrine reinforced this perception (Leung 2002).

In the West, Falun Gong is recognised primarily through those five seemingly innocuous but characteristic set of meditational exercises that are readily accessible even to novices. In reality, Falun Gong is essentially a rigorous system of morality (Penny 2003; Chan 2004; Ackerman 2005; Burgdoff 2003) with strict moral practice promised to result in physical renewal and vigour (Ownby 2000; Madsen 2000). Adherents endeavor to foster the important spiritual values of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance through the practice of particular exercises and meditation (Hongzhi 1999b; Madsen 2000). When fittingly developed, the follower encounters the supreme nature of the universe and is invigorated by the turning of the 'falun' (Leung 2002). Negative karma accrued from this life and in previous incarnations is purged as virtue is accrued, allowing for the cultivation of spiritual advancement (Ownby 2008). Despite the teachings around morality in Falun Gong, adherents and leaders alike claim that Falun Gong is not a religion; instead, they claim it is a movement that promotes the cultivation of morality and the spirit (Keith and Lin 2003; Madsen 2000; Li 2014).

For Falun Gong practitioners, everything is a dichotomy, either good or evil. Individuals are practitioners true to Falun Gong, or ordinary people. Those who remain faithful to Li's teachings are thought to have a fated relationship with Falun Gong and access to the highest spiritual truth. If they can remain resolute to Li's teachings and circumvent the many seductions along the way, this elite grouping will realise enlightenment. Should there be any deviation, those heretics will continue as ordinary people with pathetic lives, destined for annihilation at some time in the near future (Lowe 2003). To most objective observers, these apocalyptic and millenarian characteristics make Falun Gong indistinguishable from a religion (Chang 2004; Burgdoff 2003).

2.2 *The Theology of Falun Gong*

Though based in the much older belief systems of Taoism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk religions (Chang 2004), Falun Gong assumes a more contemporary appearance with numerous references to UFOs and a kind of narrative pseudoscience, more commonly associated with movements such as Scientology (Raine 2014). Founder Li Hongzhi insisted that the teachings of Falun Gong should displace the existing scientific knowledge consumed by 'ordinary' people (Deng and Fang 2000). He declined to engage scientists directly and

claimed victory when scientific paradigms were challenged, arbitrarily dismissing critics who doubted the authenticity of his ideas (Ownby 2008). Instead, he claimed he preferred to expend his energies on those who were ready for his message; that the modern scientific paradigm is contained within and transcended by Falun Gong (Ownby 2008). According to Li, science remained ignorant of the reality behind the universe and cautioned that all would be lost unless the world would turn its collective ear to him (Chang 2004). Li espoused a complex pseudoscience incompatible with modern science. In its place, he proposed a system that promised great insights into physics, geophysics, astrophysics, astronomy, chemistry, history, geography, philosophy, social science and so on (Deng and Fang 2000).

Falun Gong's founder warned that the moral decadence characteristic of our time would inevitably lead to an apocalypse; apparently, just another in a long line. He consistently referred to the "Dharma-ending period" of "the apocalypse," the "Great havoc" and the "end times." He insisted that morals were deteriorating day by day as civilisation moved towards inevitable annihilation. This impending apocalypse was the consequence of humans not being "up to standard" (Farley 2010). The majority of the blame could be apportioned to 'science', a consequence of its "faulty understanding of the human race, nature, and matter," which in turn has resulted in "the degeneration of morality in today's human society" (Hongzhi 1999c). Fortunately, according to Li, Falun Dafa would provide salvation for humanity (Chang 2004; Chan 2004; Irons 2003).

Li further stated that scientific advances, including cloning, had appeared only since the decline of human morality since science was the enemy of morality (Chang 2004). Modern science and its opposition to morality were also deemed culpable for the mixing of races, causing each subsequent generation to be inferior to the one it followed. Li was adamant that each race presided over its own celestial world; for example, the white race had Heaven. However, with the blurring of races, the progeny of interracial marriages had no celestial world. Li further proclaimed that East and West had formerly been separated by immense deserts designed to prevent the different races from consorting, but once science had overcome those obstacles, the races could mix and inappropriately procreate. Cosmic Law forbade the mixing of races and science was responsible for this transgression (Palmer 2007).

Li Hongzhi provided para-scientific accounts to fill those gaps in knowledge that scientists were unable to explain, which the scientific community as a whole poorly received (Ownby 2000). An example of this discourse could be seen in science's alleged failure to accommodate the idea of 'levels' or 'dimensions', which co-exist with reality as we know it. Instead, science was said to be too preoccupied with what was happening on this level (Hongzhi 1999b;

Burgdoff 2003; Ownby 2008). To attain enlightenment, a seeker must traverse these levels to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the universe. This explanation also permitted Li to neatly sidestep his critics by providing him with the opportunity to claim that he was so poorly understood because his critics were resident at a much lower level (Irons 2003; Ownby 2008; Farley 2014).

Most interestingly, Li Hongzhi made extraordinary claims about extraterrestrials, stating that science was the construct of aliens intent on infiltrating and controlling humanity. In a 1999 *Time* magazine interview, Li described some of these aliens: "One type of alien looks like a human but has a nose made of a bone" (Hongzhi, in Van Biema and FlorCruz 1999: 74). Purportedly, these aliens had kidnapped people to keep them as pets on their planet. The aliens also envied the "perfect bodies" of humans and coveted them for themselves. Their intention was to replace humanity with clones (Hongzhi in Van Biema and FlorCruz 1999; Weiner 2000; Palmer 2007). Li stated that:

> The aliens have introduced modern machinery like computers and airplanes. They started by teaching mankind about modern science, so people believe more and more science, and spiritually, they are controlled. Everyone thinks that scientists invent on their own when in fact their inspiration is manipulated by the aliens. In terms of culture and spirit, they already control man. Mankind cannot live without science.
>
> HONGZHI, in WEINER 2000: 10

According to Li, all humans that have ever used a computer have been assigned a serial number by the aliens (Weiner 2000).

Li has also made extraordinary claims about humankind's history on the planet. He stated that people had inhabited the planet for far longer than anyone could have guessed. This civilisation is just one of a series that have existed here, only to degenerate before being destroyed. A very few survivors managed to seed the human race and begin once more (Chang 2004; Rahn 2002; Burgdoff 2003; Irons 2003). The few survivors, along with their technologies, were ferried to another planet by the gods, so that they could start once more at a technologically advanced stage. Allegedly, other intelligent beings who are indigenous to their own planets were continuing to develop and become more advanced than us. These 'others' could slide into other dimensions with their spacecraft and navigate in other time-space continua at fantastic speeds. These beings were morally corrupt, and their greed and lust have resulted in violent and destructive 'star wars'. Earth has been fortunate enough to escape their attention thus far as humans pose no serious threat. When humanity does become more formidable, we will not be spared (Chang 2004).

3 Conflict with the Government of the People's Republic of China

The persecution of Falun Gong began in the last year of the twentieth century, with the banning and detaining of scores of practitioners from those parks in which they used to practice their morning exercises (Xie and Zhu 2004). According to Falun Gong practitioners, a comprehensive propaganda campaign immediately ensued, with 347 highly critical articles of Falun Gong appearing in *The People's Daily* (Xie and Zhu 2004).

Though the scale of the campaign has not been quantitively verified, the fact that it happened is not in doubt (Noakes and Ford 2015). The slogan purportedly used by the regime is that they would crush and devastate Falun Gong and its practitioners "financially, spiritually, and physically" (Xie and Zhu 2004). The banning of Falun Gong by the Chinese Government was in response to large gatherings at the central Communist Party compound at Zhongnanhai (Ching 2001) where adherents had gathered in silent protest against the imprisonment of adherents. These protesters were themselves protesting against the confinement of those protesting outside of the Tianjin College of Education in response to an anti-Falun Gong article appearing in the magazine *Teenager Science and Technology Outlook* (Greenlee 2006; Li 2014; Lin 2016).

Falun Gong adherents, along with some other commentators, have claimed that these demonstrations were planned by the Chinese government seeking a publicly legitimate reason to ban the organisation. It was further argued that the desire for this prohibition originated as early as 1996, but it was not until 1999 that the secretary-general of the State Council, the notorious '610' Office, Luo Gan, succeeded in spearheading the "disintegration" of Falun Gong (Noakes and Ford 2015; Lin 2016). The 610 Office was a security agency of the Chinese government formed for the sole purpose of eliminating Falun Gong (Greenlee 2006). It is claimed that Luo Gan instructed the police to direct protesters to Zhongnanhai to create a scene whereby the government could legitimately move against Falun Gong (Ching 2001). However, if these demonstrations were shrouded in controversy, more shocking scenes were yet to come. These events were to position Falun Gong front and center in the Western media (Farley 2014).

On the eve of Chinese New Year in 2001, something would happen that would galvanise the government of the People's Republic of China into definitive action against Falun Gong. On this night, seven Falun Gong members travelled the 550-kilometer journey from Kaifeng to Tiananmen Square and set fire to themselves, captured by the cameras of CNN (Biggs 2005; Thornton 2005). A man, seated on the ground, was quickly enveloped by fire; two mother-daughter pairs, careened with extended arms raised as the flames consumed their bodies.

Though police hurried to put out the fire, they were not fast enough, and a young woman, just thirty-six years old, died from the burns. Initially, the Chinese government attempted to suppress news of the event. Western journalists had recorded the horrific scene, but the authorities immediately confiscated the tape (Chang 2004). However, soon the government realised they could leverage this incident to muster opposition to Falun Gong. A week later, state television broadcast some footage showing the twelve-year-old daughter of one of the adherents, rolling around in agony. The government framed the deaths as 'cultic suicide', and discrediting them as a form of protest (Biggs 2005).

The leadership of Falun Gong quickly denied any connection to the self-immolations. In exile in the USA, it released its own video alleging the Chinese government fabricated the incident (Biggs 2005). Falun Gong members abroad claimed that those who had set themselves alight were not true practitioners (Thornton 2005) because Falun Gong was consistently opposed to any form of killing, including suicide (Chang 2004). The attempt to separate itself from the act was undoubtedly counterproductive. No doubt, the leaders of Falun Gong did not encourage or sanction these actions; but it is even more unlikely that it formed part of a Chinese government conspiracy to discredit the organisation. Even though the Chinese government used the media generated by the event to the detriment of Falun Gong, another two people set themselves alight shortly afterwards (Biggs 2005). On February 16 in Beijing, another follower, just twenty-five years old, immolated himself. It took only a few minutes for the police to reach Tan Yihui, a shoeshine from Hunan province, but he had already perished (Chang 2004). The self-immolations were to continue. On July 1, Luo Guili self-immolated in Nanning in southern China. This time, the victim was just nineteen years old. He died the following day of heart and lung failure, a consequence of severe burns (Chang 2004).

Before the Chinese government propaganda campaign leveraging the self-immolations, people were puzzled by the crackdown on such a seemingly insignificant and benign organisation. In the light of the tragic deaths as a result of the self-immolations, public opinion turned, and people believed a crackdown was reasonable. The face of the twelve-year-old girl was shown on television over the course of a month by the authorities, and public opinion moved away from Falun Gong. It seems unlikely that the state could have attained such success had there been no children involved in the burnings. They gave the Chinese government a justification to step up their oppression of the organisation, including the systematic torture of its members. The Chinese government justified its position, claiming that around 1,700 Falun Gong practitioners had taken their own lives; evidence enough of Falun Gong's cultish evil they reasoned (Bejesky 2004; Biggs 2005). The media featured many diatribes spelling

out the evils of Falun Gong. Chinese children were impelled to participate in anti–Falun Gong instruction (Greenlee 2006; Farley 2013). Some twelve million school students signed a declaration asserting that they did not believe in cults and in fact, strenuously shunned them. Scores of workers gathered at mass meetings, signing petitions condemning Falun Gong (Chang 2004). Half a year after the immolations, Falun Gong was disempowered and thoroughly discredited within China (Richardson and Edelman 2011). During 2002, the maimed survivors were paraded around and featured in a press conference. "Falun Gong is indeed an evil cult, and it led me to this," pronounced Chen Guo, the daughter of the deceased woman (Thornton 2005). The footage of the young girl with her badly charred and bandaged face calling out for her mother repeatedly featured on television (Chang 2004).

In response to the intense political scrutiny, Falun Gong adherents displayed posters on power poles in Shenyang City and conducted letterbox drops on Beijing's back streets. They disputed the authorities' accounts of the unfortunate events and instead criticised the Chinese government for ignoring the overwhelming poverty and unemployment that were such significant social problems. There was a deluge of video footage and automated phone calls that played recordings criticising the government, which overwhelmed residents. Angry Falun Gong practitioners also hacked into television broadcasts to correct the misrepresentations (Chang 2004; Thornton 2005; Rahn 2002).

The apocalyptic teachings of Li Hongzhi could well have precipitated the self-immolations through a veiled call to civil disobedience and the promise of salvation for martyrs. Li teaches that the "Ending Period of Catastrophe" is almost here, that contemporary society is degenerate and will be purged. Genuine Falun Gong practitioners will be the only ones who will be saved. Li called Jiang Zemin, at the time China's president, "the highest representative of the evil force in the human world" (Rahn 2002) claiming he was being manipulated by higher beings to crush the movement, a reference to the unusual theology of Falun Gong. According to Li, only when the evil is totally eliminated can practitioners return home through 'consummation' to the Falun Dafa paradise (Rahn 2002).

The *New York Times* portrayed China as having "been caught off guard by a vast, silent, virtually invisible movement (if not exactly a revolution) that came together not on the streets but on the Internet" (Crossette 1999). Falun Gong is practised at exploiting modern communications technology, maintaining a multitude of websites in several languages hosting Li Hongzhi's writings and enabling communication between followers. Members also maintained contact with each other by mobile phone, email, and the Internet (Chang, 2004). Li Hongzhi maintains a tight control, directing the movement from his home

in New York (Han and Nasir 2016). The group has practitioners in Asia, the USA, UK, Canada, Israel, and Australia who are intimately connected virtually (Farley 2014).

4 Truth or Fiction?

Falun Gong as a movement attracted considerable criticism following the alleged self-immolation of practitioners (Bell and Boas 2003). In response, Falun Gong practitioners maintained that the blaming of these self-immolations on adherents is part of the greater Chinese Government conspiracy against Falun Gong (Xie and Zhu 2004). For example, they claimed that the original China Central Television (CCTV) footage, when played in slow motion, indicated that the Chinese government most likely staged the act (for example, see "The Staged 'Self-Immolation' Incident on Tiananmen Square";[1] Cheung 2016).

The truth is far from clear on this matter, with both sides of the argument making complex claims and counterclaims.[2] The reporting of suicide in an authoritarian state is rarely straightforward. Until the late 1980s, there was little reliable data on suicide in China (Ma *et al.* 2009). In many cases, World Health Organization estimations of Chinese suicide rates are up to forty per cent higher than those of the Chinese government (Phillips *et al.* 2002). Conversely, there are claims that China attributed suicides to Falun Gong to discredit them or to undermine public support for them. Falun Gong practitioners have publicised these accusations against Chinese government reports of self-immolation widely in both Chinese and Western media.

Their denial makes doctrinal sense. Repeatedly, Li Hongzhi has denounced suicide, calling it a sin as is taking any life. According to the tenets of Falun Gong, God has a plan laid out for every individual. Not every detail of life is scheduled out, but the significant milestones such as birth and death are envisaged to take place at certain immutable times. Apparently, Falun Gong practitioners can influence their lives, but it is challenging to make a life longer. A person is forcefully sidestepping God's plan when he or she suicides. Suicide brings with it even more negative karma even though it may temporarily remove a person from suffering. This karma must be dealt with in a future incarnation. It is far

1 "The Staged 'Self-Immolation' Incident on Tiananmen Square." At www.clearwisdon.net. Accessed 15/04/17.

2 Though clearly making emotional and unsubstantiated claims, many of these accounts of mistreatment of the organisation of Falun Gong and adherents appeared in reputable Western journals using methodologies and approaches that would usually disqualify them from publishing there (for example, see Cheung 2016).

better to ride out the suffering, eliminating karma already accrued and not adding to the store through committing suicide (Hongzhi 1999a). Preparations are already occurring for that individual's next incarnation before a person dies. As a mother carries a child, the fetus is awaiting the consciousness of the individual. If someone dies before his or her designated time by his or her own hand, then that person must wait until he or she has passed the allotted time of his or her predestined lifespan. Once that time has passed, the individual can reincarnate but with an additional burden of karma (Penny 2012).

In sum, it is very nearly impossible to determine the truth behind the self-immolations of those people who lost their lives in the early days of the twenty-first century. The explanations proffered by either side are plausible, and there is an endless stream of supposed evidence to support each side's interpretation. In a contested situation where strong interests and strong identity are involved, even a 'middle ground' position may itself be called out as a conspiracy theory. When I tried to provide a balanced, academic account of the events (see Farley 2013, 2014), even acknowledging the contested nature of the available information, I was accused of being part of the Chinese government conspiracy to discredit Falun Gong (for example, see Wu 2016).

5 A Personal Experience of Conspiracy

Soon after my publications that referred to the self-immolations were released, I was contacted by a Falun Gong practitioner who refuted the information I presented, even though it was not first hand and was fully referenced. I had clearly acknowledged the contentious nature of the information that I had referenced. I decided to ignore the email, after all, researching in this area, I did tend to attract a lot of criticism from religious practitioners of one sort or another.

Very soon afterwards I was contacted by current colleagues from the university at which I work and from former colleagues at the university where I used to work. The story was always the same; they had been contacted by the same Falun Gong practitioner, claiming that I was an instrument of the Chinese government and that the purpose of my research was to discredit Falun Gong. In one instance, a woman who was not known to me, collapsed in my office doorway, saying that she feared for my life after receiving an email from the same Falun Gong practitioner. It took me some time to calm her down. The university lawyer contacted me to say that the Vice Chancellor and many other senior people at the university had been contacted and that the very same Falun Gong practitioner had called for my immediate dismissal from my role.

I was investigated for Academic Misconduct and was found not to have a case to answer. The Falun Gong practitioner continued to contact people even further removed from my immediate circles: editors of journals in which I had published, people on the editorial boards of those journals, co-authors of papers I had written (often not even about Falun Gong!) Without exception, the people contacted did get in touch with me and offered their unconditional support.

On 21 May, 2016, an article written by the Falun Gong practitioner about me was published in the right-leaning *News Weekly*. Titled, "Honorary Fellow Means to Dishonourable End," the article rolled out the same claims about me: that I was a tool of the Chinese government, that I had made unsubstantiated claims about Falun Gong, and that I misrepresented Falun Gong's teachings.[3] The practitioner published another article about me on a web page called *China in Perspective*.[4] This article is certainly a lot more inflammatory than anything that he had published in English, probably because an article like this would not be published in the West due to the risk of litigation. The author probably thought that this article would remain undiscovered as it is written in Chinese. He probably did not count on Google Translate being so effective.

I have no knowledge about the intended audience or the purpose of the page. In this article, he claimed that the Chinese government is trying to corrupt western academic freedom. There has been much controversy about the infiltration of Confucius Institutes into Western universities. Claims have been made that these are merely listening organs and propaganda tools of the Chinese government (Pan 2013). Even so, the author argued that these attempts are minor compared to the direct influence that the Chinese government exerts over Western academics. Moreover, he considered me to be the prime example (see Jianguao 2015).

The intensity of the conspiratorial accusations shows how high tensions are still running in this debate. Though here I have spoken about how ready a Falun Gong practitioner was to accuse me of being part of a Chinese government conspiracy, I do suspect that it cuts both ways. I have been told by a Chinese colleague that my articles have appeared on anti-Falun Gong sites maintained by the government of the People's Republic of China, but I have no way of determining the veracity of those claims. No doubt innocent people are unwittingly dragged in to support the conspiracy theories promulgated by both sides. On the one hand, Falun Gong practitioners are playing to a Western audience

3 What I find most interesting is that the author claimed he fled from China in 1992 in order to embrace academic freedom, among other things (Wu 2016). He did not seem to value my own academic freedom.

4 At http://www.chinainperspective.com/ArtShow.aspx?AID=73261. Accessed 15/04/17.

who are naturally inclined to be suspicious of China and its alleged human rights abuses (Aldrich *et al.* 2015). On the other, the Chinese government is playing to a corresponding audience who are irrationally afraid of 'so-called' cults and who are inclined to dismiss Falun Gong on that basis (Pfeifer 2016).

6 Falun Gong as Conspirators—or Not

The Chinese government's persecution of Falun Gong in some ways can be likened to the 'Red Scare' incited by Senator Joseph McCarthy against communists in the USA in the 1950s (Van Alstyne 2003). Certainly, it is usually in those times of significant social unrest that minorities become the stuff of conspiracy theories. The irrational fear of communism in the United States grew in the turbulent aftermath of World War II (Gibson 1998). The persecution of Falun Gong occurred in a China suffering a protracted and challenging birth into modernity, and as an emerging economic superpower in the last years of the twentieth century (Farley 2013). Characteristic of claims of conspiracy is the accusation, usually unfounded, that expatriates are actively conspiring against the government and so it is with those theories put forward about Falun Gong. Li had fled China by the time that Falun Gong was banned, and there is little doubt that his residence in the USA would have fanned the flames of China's suspicion. Though there is no evidence produced to support claims that Li was scheming to overthrow the government of the People's Republic of China, the allegations were nevertheless made. The current website of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the USA, though apparently not updated lately, still states that Falun Gong's activities are directed towards undermining China's stability and overthrowing the government (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States n.d. (b)).

Moscovici (1987) claimed that a conspiracy theory could be a countersubversive tool to combat unacceptable practices and beliefs and the people who conceive of them. The minority is charged with crimes, and the general populace is recruited to help find and remove them. The conspiracy theory relies on a secret bond between adherents and the purpose of that bond is to cause great upheaval in society (Moscovici 1987). This causes a duality where one side is benign, and the other is malignant; which is which depends on which side you are on. There are no in-betweens; only right and wrong (Moscovici 1987). If Falun Gong practitioners are portrayed as being hard-working or as law-abiding, this is viewed as a mask adopted only with the intent to deceive. For the government of the People's Republic of China, Falun Gong is very definitely on the wrong side. In a letter written to the editor of the *Washington Post*

(but which the paper declined to print), Embassy spokesperson Yu Shuning described Falun Gong as:

> nothing but an evil cult that has all the inherent characteristics of a cult: worship of its leader, systematic mind control, spreading heretic ideas, amassing wealth, secret organization and endangering the society.
>
> YU SHUNING, in Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States n.d. (c)

Falun Gong adherents see that their very survival is at stake, and in many ways, it probably is. Their generalised alertness to transgressions against them by the Chinese government has made them hyper-vigilant, sometimes seeing conspiracies where none exist. According to Falun Gong members, the Chinese government banned the organisation for many reasons. These appeared in an article, "Ancient Wisdom for Modern Predicaments: The Truth, the Deceit, and Issues Surrounding Falun Gong," by Frank Tian Xie, Ph.D. and Tracey Zhu M.D., which appeared on the website of the International Cultic Studies Association. Though many reasons were given, I have selected two to highlight here.

First, the leaders estimate that at the time was Falun Gong was banned, there were some 70 million Falun Gong adherents at a time when there were only 60 million members of the Chinese Communist Party (Xie and Zhu 2004; Cheung 2016). This could be true. Falun Gong was said to have between twenty and eighty million followers (Ching 2001). Whatever the actual number, it was large and would certainly give the Chinese government reason to pause. The Communist Party has never had a mandate from the Chinese people and so are insecure in the face of any popular people's movement (Ching 2001).

Second, practitioners believed that the persecution of Falun Gong was also a personal decision by then leader Jiang Zemin, and this is corroborated by commentators (for example, see Ching, 2001). Many claimed that Jiang was hand-picked and appointed to the party secretary position by former communist power broker, Deng Xiaoping, without going through any formal election process. Because of a perceived lack of support from either the military or civilians, Falun Gong practitioners stated, he was particularly sensitive to any threat to his power and authority. The massive gathering of Falun Gong practitioners in Tiananmen Square on April 25, 1999, is said to have ignited his jealousy and provided a focus for his deepest fears (Xie and Zhu 2004).

Whatever the true reasons are, Western scholars are unlikely ever to get the full story behind the continued persecution of Falun Gong members. Though Falun Gong is not the evil cult that the government of the People's Republic of China believe it to be, there are still many of its practices and beliefs that are

concerning, such as adherents' reluctance to avail themselves of medical treatment (Farley 2014).

7 Conclusion

The persecution of Falun Gong has received little recent attention in the press outside of China. Noakes and Ford (2015) report that there are still Falun Gong practitioners in China who seek to raise awareness about the plight of Falun Gong practitioners through distributing materials. These authors also claim that the active suppression of the organisation continues but that Chinese government agents are more subtle in their approaches. The authors have formulated techniques that enable them to track the initiatives at the lower levels of government and convincingly argue that Falun Gong is still actively suppressed (Noakes and Ford 2015). While there is little overt repression, Falun Gong adherents risk being labelled as 'conspiracy theorists' even when their claims are based in fact. According to several recent accounts, the widespread detention and torture of Falun Gong adherents continues unabated in China (see Li 2014; Noakes and Ford 2015). The conspiracy is surrendered only after a decisive victory has been won (Moscovici 1987) and the suppression of Falun Gong has not been convincingly achieved.

There can be no denying that the government of the People's Republic of China has staged a relentless campaign against Falun Gong. Their motivation for doing so can only be speculated about, but Noakes and Ford (2015) conclude that the Chinese government would lose too much face if they were to reverse their campaign of persecution and suppression before claiming a decisive victory. What is not as clear is exactly how far they were and are prepared to go. The belief that the Chinese government is actively sponsoring Western academics to discredit Falun Gong cannot be substantiated. I am one of the more active researchers of Falun Gong, and while I am prepared to concede that those articles that can be viewed as being critical of Falun Gong may have been taken and reused (without my permission) in various forums, no approach has been made to me, either directly or indirectly.

Both Falun Gong and the government of the People's Republic of China are seeking support from a Western audience. China is an emerging political and economic powerhouse, anxious to be seen as transitioning from "China as a threat" to "China as a responsible power/stakeholder" (Lee 2013). Though a gross oversimplification of its foreign policy, China is seeking to form strong partnerships with those receptive countries in the West to secure markets for its manufacturing industry and ensure a supply of raw materials to fuel

its economy (Ford 2015). However, when looking internally, China under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, is increasingly paranoid about threats to the unelected regime (Shirk 2017). It is not the differences of minorities such as Falun Gong that offend; instead, it is the challenge that they afford; the criticism of that which should not be criticised. This criticism marks the transgression of a taboo that cannot be tolerated (Moscovici 1987). China is keen to suppress opposition within its borders while retaining a good public image, seeking to influence Western perceptions by discrediting Falun Gong and justifying the continued crackdown. Falun Gong practitioners, alert to these sensitivities, work assiduously to keep a Western public informed of gross human rights violations in the hope that international pressure can bring an end to the persecutions. They play on the West's embedded suspicions of China, particularly in relation to human rights violations (Aldrich *et al.* 2015).

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CHAPTER 23

The Messiah is a Salesman, Yet Consumerism is a Con(spiracy): The Church of the SubGenius, Work, and the Pursuit of Slack as a Spiritual Ideal

*Carole M. Cusack**

1 Introduction

In the West, the second half of the twentieth century was characterised by the dominance of three interrelated phenomena: secularisation, individualism and consumer capitalism.[1] The secular public space of Western democracies became filled with innovative goods that individuals sought to acquire, both for pleasure and as sources of personal identity, and religion and spirituality were subsumed into this marketplace as institutional Christianity retreated. As a consequence, a plethora of 'niche' products emerged to meet the needs of those who were not satisfied with traditional religion, yet who still felt the appeal of religio-spiritual culture and experiences as sources in the dual task of self-actualisation and the crafting of meaning (Lyon 2000: 73–96). Conservative critics and the discipline of religious studies alike initially categorised new religious movements (NRMs) as inferior and not 'real' religion, but in the twenty-first century J. Gordon Melton noted that the academic approach to new religions had changed, and rather than treating NRMs as a problem that required a solution, scholars now accepted that "the emergence of new religions seems to be one sign of a healthy and free society" (Melton 2007: 109). The secularisation thesis has been queried, and the range of new religions and spiritualities has been heralded as proof of "re-enchantment" (or desecularisation) and of the dawn of a new "Axial Age" of religious creativity (Lambert 1999).

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1 Carole M. Cusack, "The Messiah is a Salesman, Yet Consumerism is a Con(spiracy): The Church of the SubGenius, Work, and the Pursuit of Slack as a Spiritual Ideal" was originally published in *Nova Religio*, Vol. 19, Issue 2, 2015, pp. 49–64, and is reprinted here with the permission of Unversity of California Press.

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The application of the term 'religion' also liberalised over the sixty years from 1950, and the study of religions extrapolated from or based on fiction, conspiracy theories, parody, and popular culture, is a small but important subdiscipline (Possamai 2005; Cusack 2010: 89–91; Davidsen 2014).

This chapter investigates the use of the 'conspiracy' motif in the cosmology and teachings of the Church of the SubGenius (COSG), a marginal invented religion that was founded by Ivan Stang (b. Douglass St Clair Smith) and Philo Drummond (b. Steve Wilcox) in Dallas, Texas, in 1979 (Chryssides 2012: 95). There are few academic treatments of COSG, which is most often derided as a "parody religion." The negative reaction that the religion provokes is epitomised by Paul Mann, who dismissed "Bob" as a "stupid guru" venerated by a "sophomoric priesthood who pretend-believe that he is real … those who promote his absurdity insist on its literal truth, even at those moments when they are most outrageously at play" (Mann 1995). It is COSG's insistence that it is a real religion that engenders ire in academic commentators; Ivan Stang insists that COSG is legitimately both "satire and a real stupid religion … The fact that it admits that it's a joke proves that it's the only honest religion" (Gill 2006). Whether COSG is a 'legitimate' religion is ultimately unimportant for the argument presented here. It is sufficient to note David Chidester's notion that for a fake or parody religion to succeed as cultural criticism, "it must look exactly like a real religion," as it will not be recognised or have any impact otherwise (Chidester 2005: 210).[2] Suffice to say, COSG satisfies this criterion, in terms of closely resembling religion as traditionally understood.

The *SubGenius Pamphet #1* (also titled *The World Ends Tomorrow and You May Die!*) was published in 1979, but the mythos of COSG says that "Bob" founded the church in 1953, a year earlier than L. Ron Hubbard's inauguration of the Church of Scientology. In 1999 the headquarters of COSG moved to Cleveland, Ohio. Members join local "clenches," and major events called Devivals (which feature preaching, performance art, and comedy) occur regularly. COSG has a significant online presence and a range of print publications, and Ivan Stang's

2 Chidester relies on the anthropologist Rodney Needham for this insight. Needham's *Exemplars* (1985) discusses how the eighteenth-century conman George Psalmanaazaar (c. 1679–1763) published a faked account of Formosa (Taiwan) that was highly successful. Following Needham, Chidester argued that "the temporary success of this fraud can be attributed to Psalmanaazaar's ability to make his fake account of the religion of Formosa look very much like a recognizable religion or at least one that would fit expectations of an 'exotic' religion among his readers in England. Such fraudulent productions of authenticity require a careful mediation between extraordinary accounts, which cannot be independently confirmed or disconfirmed, and ordinary expectations about the primitive, the savage, or the exotic. In this work of mediation, successful frauds in the study of religion have acted as intercultural brokers speaking in the name of silent partners who bear the burden of authenticity" (Chidester 2005: 191).

programme "The Hour of Slack" is broadcast on American college radio stations (Cusack 2014: 182). I have elsewhere detailed the complex cosmology and mythology of COSG, which involves: Atlantis and its Yeti inhabitants; "Bob" Dobbs' ability to die and return to life multiple times; the genetic engineering of the SubGenii (who are part-human and part-Yeti); the vengeful god Jehovah-1 (known also as WOTAN and many other divine names), whose purpose is to deprive people of the mystical quality of "Slack"; the Elder Gods of Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos and their robot agents the Watchers, who appear as UFOs or "flying saucers"; the Conspiracy, which seeks to control everyone and render them powerless; and the alien race of Xists, who created the Yetis and who will arrive in spacecraft to save their descendants the SubGenii on July 5, 1998, known as X-Day or the "Rupture," a pun on the Rapture of dispensationalist premillenarian Protestantism (Cusack 2010: 83–91).

The theme of the conspiracy operates on two levels in COSG. The first has to do with the popular culture tropes described above. SubGenii possess Slack, which makes them independent and creative, and the architects of the Conspiracy constantly seek to deprive them of this liberating power, and to render them like other people, ordinary human beings referred to as "Pinks" or "Normals" (Cusack 2014: 182–186). Normals are characterised by the fact that they believe that to work for a living is the norm. Slack is the quality of doing nothing, rejecting work, and yet having sufficient wealth to live well. "Bob" has abundant Slack, and promotes deliberate Abnormality to preserve SubGenii from the agents of the Conspiracy.[3] SubGenii are constantly at risk of being "taken" by the leaders of the Conspiracy, and "Bob" himself was destined by Jehovah-1 to lead the Conspiracy. Instead, he instigated a counter-conspiracy to contact the Xists and arrange for the SubGenii to be saved on X-Day (Cusack 2010: 83–111). The second level of the Conspiracy is the subject of this chapter; in this version, the Conspiracy is a materialist phantasmagoria in which people are trapped, working to earn money to buy things, and being alienated from freedom and an authentic mode of being due to this cycle of wage-slavery and consumerism.

2 The Conspiracy and the Capitalist Spectacle

The etymology of conspiracy is derived from the Latin *conspirare*, which literally means to breathe together, but connotes plotting or otherwise intending

3 "Abnormality" is capitalised because that is how it is written in COSG books. Any seemingly unusual spellings, capitalisations, or placing of quotation marks reflect the COSG publications from which the concepts are derived.

to defy the political order. Michael Barkun has posited that the sources that conspiracy theories draw upon generally fall into three categories; rejected knowledge, the cultic milieu, and stigmatised knowledge claims (2003: 23). James Webb introduced the idea of "rejected knowledge," arguing that views promoted by the "Establishment" were deemed to be suspect and that a marginalised subculture challenged such views with alternative explanations that were derided by the mainstream (Webb 1974: 10). The English sociologist Colin Campbell proposed that the 'cultic milieu' was a reservoir of 'alternative' religious and spiritual beliefs, espoused by a loose subculture in which groups constantly form and dissolve, usually through social networks (Campbell 1972: 119–136). The unifying feature of what Barkun terms "stigmatised knowledge claims" is that the 'knowledge' that is being appealed to lacks prestige; it has either been superseded, forgotten, ignored, labelled false, or suppressed (Barkun 2003: 27). Positing the existence of a conspiracy both explains *why* certain types of knowledge are rejected, and also acts as a *guarantee* of their facticity. Scholars have often noted that many late modern new religious and spiritual groups exhibit what Barkun terms "fact-fiction reversal," in which ideas about what is fiction and fact are abandoned, or are actually exchanged. This results in disbelief in or scepticism about the basic fabric of reality, life as it presents in "common sense" terms (Barkun 2003: 29).

Rejected knowledge is linked to alternative religiosity via positing a conspiracy in which "(a) nothing happens by accident, (b) nothing is as it seems, (c) everything is connected … principles [which] are fundamental to much New Age thought and alternative spirituality" (Ward and Voas 2011: 103–121). It is relatively easy to demonstrate that COSG is part of the cultic milieu, and that its extraterrestrial oriented creation and apocalypse narratives are, as Solomon Davidoff observes, "a satirical commentary on religious observance and domination, conspiracy theory and conventional morality" (2003: 170). Yet, as has been noted, COSG's relationship to both conspiracy theories and to religion is more complex and multi-layered than this would suggest. Running parallel to the science fiction conspiracy narrative is a political and economic, arguably 'realistic', conspiracy narrative that COSG both presents as 'straight', yet undermines in multiple ways through its valorisation of "Bob" Dobbs, the salesman messiah, and its marketing of SubGenius products, including membership fees, books, and merchandise. A fruitful way to explore these contradictory impulses is through the concepts of 'culture jamming', a term coined in 1984 by sound collage artists Negativland and later theorised by Mark Dery, and the spectacle, a model of late capitalism developed by the French *avant-garde* movement, Situationist International (SI), and its philosopher-spokesman Guy Debord (Dery 1993; Debord 1967 [1983]).

Under the term 'culture jamming', Dery grouped a range of social protests and activities that are the contemporary descendants of the 1968 Paris riots and the Situationist critique of the vacuity of television-dominated Western culture, and the Youth International Party (Yippie) subversion of American politics towards the end of the Vietnam War. He aligns modern Western popular culture with 'aliteracy', where people "know how to read but choose not to," and with a counter-Enlightenment "hegemony of image over language, of emotion over intellect" (Dery 1993). Culture jammers are committed to exposing the lies of this materialist, all-encompassing culture; Kalle Lasn's magazine *Adbusters* critiques capitalism on ecological grounds, the Billboard Liberation Front (BLF) wittily subverts advertising signs, and Julian Assange's "hacktivist" site Wikileaks makes public information that governments and security agencies try to hide (Lievrouw 2011: 24, 74, 83). SI refused copyright and advocated the free distribution of its texts, and skilfully avoided becoming commoditised despite mainstream attempts to co-opt its aesthetic and commitment to what is now called 'remix culture'. Edward Ball claims that the SI legacy is a range of strategies "to recycle the detritus of official learning … to reinscribe texts, figures, and artefacts … to empower them with new meanings, and … to make new products out of the leftovers of the commodity economy" (Ball 1987: 21–37). Debord's manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967 [1983]) argued that in early capitalism people delighted in the uses of consumer goods, but in spectaculist late capitalism commodities are *sui generis*. Thesis 42 states, "[t]he spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world" (Debord 1967 [1983]: 12). It is clear when COSG publications and media (radio, Internet, film) are examined that Stang and Drummond are direct inheritors of the SI worldview, and are active participants in the oppositional politics of culture jammers.

It is thus no accident that COSG iconography, and in particular the familiar image of "Bob" Dobbs (which is a cartoon of a smiling, clean-cut, pipe–smoking man), is redolent of a certain kind of "cheesy" 1950s aesthetic. America in the 1950s enjoyed post-war prosperity, with consumer goods such as televisions and cars becoming affordable for a greater percentage of the population. Television, a descendent in technological terms of film, has a particular place in Situationist thinking as the principal agent of consumer capitalist control. The ubiquity of advertising is one factor at play in this analysis, but more importantly, in Thesis 17 Debord posited that, after the use of products degraded into the possession of products, the next "phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of *having* into *appearing*" (Debord 1967 [1983]: 8). Television, a visual medium,

is the primary agent of this degradation, partly because it is saturated with advertisements, but also because it presents images of 'life' through situation comedies and even documentary and news programmes. SI argued this inevitably diminished the self-concept of the human individual, as "the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires" (10). The SI understanding of the spectacle is strongly congruent with the notion that a vast, powerful conspiracy controls not only the economy or polity of the West, but the nature of reality itself. Modern individuals feel alienated because the spectacle is a total system that robs them of their lives. Thesis 30 says, "his gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere" (30). This view is important, as it is possible to interpret it in purely rational terms, but it is also open to being interpreted in more esoteric ways, so as to accommodate views like the notorious extraterrestrial "reptilian thesis" of David Icke (Robertson 2013: 27–47).

3 "Slack," Salvation, and the Salesman Messiah

The biography of J.R. "Bob" Dodds as presented by COSG has certain similarities to that of L. Ron Hubbard in official Church of Scientology (CoS) publications. The 'legendary' date for the founding of COSG is 1953, one year prior to Hubbard transforming his therapeutic movement Dianetics into a religion, Scientology. The 1950s is often presented as socially and religiously conservative, which is accurate, but it was a decade in which new spiritualities, in particular UFO and alien-based religions, appeared. These included the Aetherius Society, founded by George King in 1954, and the Summit Lighthouse, founded by Mark L. Prophet in 1958. Scientology has important synergies with UFO religions; the Operating Thetan Level III materials reveal the crucial space opera narrative of the galactic warlord Xenu, which Mikael Rothstein terms CoS's "founding myth" (Rothstein 2009: 365). The dramatic UFO mythology of COSG riffs off Hubbard's religious texts, and the 'straight' critique of materialism that COSG mounts through its saviour-deity "Bob," who founds COSG in order to make money, similarly riffs off Hubbard's alleged comment to the effect that starting a religion will make more money than writing science fiction (Lindsay 1999) and the high price of courses and publications sold by CoS. In COSG myth, Hubbard and Dobbs meet, and Dobbs reputedly said, "They may be Pink but their money is green" (Holland and Smith 1992). The COSG focus on the conspiracy echoes Hubbard's Cold War-influenced doctrine of "fair game," by

which Scientology "was allowed to use any means at its disposal to counterattack and defeat its enemies" (Urban 2006: 358).

Like Hubbard, Dobbs is said to have been precocious as a child and to have tried various spiritual paths, including Sufism, Rosicrucianism, and Gurdjieff's Fourth Way. After becoming a successful salesman of fluoride to government agencies, he travelled to Tibet, where he had his Third Nostril opened, met his Yeti kin, and learned that despite his human appearance, he has entirely Yeti genetic code (SubGenius Foundation 1987 [1983]: 4). COSG teachings present "Bob" Dobbs as having had a mystical experience in the early 1940s while building a television set. Jehovah-1, the demiurge of the COSG universe, empowered him so that he was "stronger, braver, more attractive to women, and able to control Time, which gave access to the non-material realm" (Cusack 2010: 85). However, Jehovah-1 intended "Bob" to lead the Conspiracy; he rejected this and instead instigated a counter-conspiracy to unite SubGenii, ensure them of limitless Slack, and establish contact with the Xists to secure the salvation of the SubGenii and the destruction of the Conspiracy leaders and their foot-soldiers, the Pinks. When enSlackened, SubGenii are empowered and can resist the Conspiracy, despite its strength. Slack is akin to the Tao:

> [t]he Slack that can be described is not the true Slack … Slack, in its cosmic sense, is all that remains when not-Slack is taken away … It is unknowable, ineffable, unsearchable, incomprehensible … Slack is neither created nor destroyed … Abstract unto incomprehensibility, it is the definitionless.
>
> SUBGENIUS FOUNDATION 1987 [1983]: 63

The Conspiracy deprives people of Slack. This is congruent with Debord's argument that although leisure appears to be freedom from work, this is an illusion. Thesis 219 states that, "[t]he spectacle obliterates the boundaries between self and world by crushing the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world and it obliterates the boundaries between true and false by driving all lived truth below the *real presence* of fraud ensured by the organization of appearance" (Debord 1967 [1983]: 56).

COSG preaches that while the modern West claims to value individualism, it does not want true individuals, as it is easier to control drones and clones. Therefore the Conspiracy manipulates people into becoming underlings. SubGenii struggle against this and have the advantage of a Nental Ife, which is like a soul. The Pinks do not have a Nental Ife, which means that they have no imagination and are thus even less likely to rebel against the Conspiracy. COSG has no official doctrines or practices that members must believe or do, but there

are five suggestions made in the scriptures. First, *The SubGenius Pamphlet #1* told SubGenii to "REPENT! QUIT YOUR JOB! SLACK OFF!" (Wittig 1994: 4). Second, all COSG members are told to "buy SubGenius" as a precautionary measure because, although "Bob" "will always be okay … if his *outreach* shrivels up and blows away, YOU WON'T BE" (SubGenius Foundation 1994: 152). The third recommendation is "that the individual must confuse all data and contribute to the breakdown of law and order … SubGenii are advised to deface the lenses of security cameras and to hack into information systems" (Cusack 2010: 89). The fourth action point is that ordinary humans, Pinks or Normals, should be eradicated. The fifth is that the Conspiracy is afraid of SubGenii, as it wants people to be Normals who do not suspect its activities nor ask questions about the extent of its influence. The specialness of SubGenii is that they can 'see', they have awareness of the Conspiracy, know of the existence of Jehovah-1 and the Elder Gods, and through J.R. "Bob" Dobbs they have confidence that the present state of life is temporary; the Xists spaceships may arrive any day (Cusack 2010: 93).

Stripped of science fiction motifs, the COSG worldview is almost identical to that of the Situationists, and its activities (Devivals, culture jamming, anarchic radio programmes, and cartoonish publications) are forms of what SI called "counter spectacle," undertaken to resist banalization and to bring about what I have elsewhere termed "guerrilla enlightenment" (Cusack 2010: 84, 93, 110–111).[4] It is also the case that COSG teachings parallel Debord's contention that the spectacle is the capitalist replacement for theology or the "religious illusion," as everyday life has ceased to be comprehensible, and has become mysterious, which is a driver of consumption as people seek to penetrate the mystery through the acquisition of commodities (Debord 1967 [1983]: 10). SubGenii reject consumerism and deny the value of materialism, but acknowledge an inversion of Pink values by means of "Bulldada," which "is that mysterious quality that impregnates certain 'ordinary' things with meaning for the SubGenius no matter how valueless they may appear to The Others" (SubGenius Foundation 1987 [1983]: 71). The contradiction between the COSG promotion of a salesman as messiah and the rejection of materialism and the embrace of Slack as a spiritual ideal is deceptive, too. It seems that COSG's credibility must be fatally undermined by urging members, "[f]or happiness, you cannot rely on others. … Therefore you must depend on *yourself* and 'Bob'. 'You' make yourself happy—and what can make you even happier are MONEY, POWER, AND SUCCESS" (137–138). However, the final section of this article considers the role of humour

4 The source of the term "guerrilla enlightenment" is Alex Norman. In conversation, he indicated that Kerry Thornley thought Discordians must culture jam to liberate people, bring them to *satori*, whether they want it or not.

in religion generally and COSG specifically, in an attempt to clarify how COSG can employ a science fiction narrative of conspiracy in a spirit of parody and irony, yet intend an economic and political narrative of conspiracy to be read 'straight', despite the incongruous fact that the messiah is a salesman and COSG solicits money from members while serenely proclaiming, "[w]e Elders of the Church do not use money in the traditional ways. We 'launch' it. We scrape the smudge of soul-essence of previous owners off of it. We burn it ritualistically—in public—and we pray over the dollars as they wither in the flames" (141).

4 Parody Religion and Humour as Liberation

Humour and religion are both human social products, and there is a long history of laughter in religious contexts. There are three main explanations as to why humans laugh: first, the superiority theory, in which aggressive laughter mocks a victim; second, the incongruity theory, in which laughter is provoked "by two opposite meanings being held together at the same time" (Gilhus 1997: 5); and third, the relief theory, in which people feel relief when they laugh at forbidden things. Ingvild Gilhus notes that laughter in the ecstatic cult of the Greco-Roman god Dionysus possessed a "chaotic dimension"; it was unpredictable and a threat to the social order (1997: 41). Laughter is spontaneous and uncontrolled, and is a bodily phenomenon, despite connections with the intellect and with wit. Gilhus' most insightful idea is that the "primary aim of modern religious laughter is liberation, its *modus vivendi* is therapeutic, but its results are not necessarily either therapeutic or liberating" (138). This observation, which points to the liminal nature of laughter, is made in the context of charismatic Christianity but is precisely applicable to COSG (and to Discordianism, of which COSG is often described as an offshoot). Humour is a major strategy in all forms of culture jamming and 'reality hacking'. The Discordian Operation Mindfuck (OM) and COSG Devivals are designed to produce "liberating laughter… [and] guerrilla enlightenment" (Cusack 2010: 93). In the contemporary West, consumer capitalism is all-pervasive, and technological surveillance provides further proof of the Conspiracy. Devivals are both staged 'counter-spectacles' in the SI sense, and what the anarchist writer Hakim Bey (b. Peter Lamborn Wilson, 1945) terms "Temporary Autonomous Zones" (TAZ), gaps in the relentless blandness of everyday life, colour in the greyness imposed by the Conspiracy and Normals (Bey 1994).

COSG combines humour with Bey's notion of Ontological Anarchy, in which it is asserted that "all ontological claims are spurious except the claim of chaos (which however is undetermined), and therefore that governance of any sort

is impossible" (Bey 1994: 2). COSG's commitment to chaos is one reason why it is possible to excoriate consumerism while presenting a salesman saviour; each clench must contain a disbeliever and a "core belief of the movement is to believe nothing and everything, preferably at the same time" (Cusack 2010: 170). The most fertile membership group for COSG is college and university students, and the anarchic cultural productions of SubGenii reinforce the intuition that it is a joke or insider discourse that one either 'gets' or fails to 'get'. The aesthetic of COSG draws upon low-tech sources such as 'zines, 1950s-style advertisements, and stills from obscure 1950s films, and this is related to COSG ideas about work. 'Zine artists and underground filmmakers produce limited edition craft items as acts of love and expressions of non-alienated labour, and to protest the fact that "most work in our society is done for, is directed by, and benefits someone else" (Duncombe 1997: 79). COSG members, through slacking off, are liberated to be creative, to accord value to crafts that 'The Others' are unable to appreciate, as they are enslaved to the high-tech, mass-produced commodities peddled by the Conspiracy.

The TAZ is a crucial concept for COSG, as all its cultural productions aim at the creation of these temporary 'pirate utopias'; yet the Situationist notion of the 'counter-spectacle' is also important. Devivals, for example, are for members of COSG, and thus are 'insider' events, but counter-spectacles are staged for Pinks and Normals, as statements about the power of the Conspiracy and the ability of SubGenii to resist it. For example, X-Day in 1998 was both an event for COSG members, but also a demonstration staged for the press and others in the wider society, for the purpose of guerrilla enlightenment. When the Xists did not appear on July 5, 1998, as predicted, mainstream press reports were derisive towards COSG, identifying the event as a fraudulent pseudo-religious apocalypse. Joshua Gunn and David E. Beard summed it up: "[o]f course, the end of the world did not occur … Stang announced that perhaps he had inverted the napkin on which Dobbs had recorded the date before retreating into the heavens. The end of the world … will actually occur on July 5, 8661. Obviously the celebration was a sham—a reason to make money, as Stang freely admits" (Gunn and Beard 2000: 269). This is to miss the point. Just as COSG's elevation of the salesman messiah "Bob" mocks the materialist orientation of Pentecostal Christianity and Scientology, so the anti-climax of X-Day mocks the countless announcements of the end of the world by religious sects. The posited inversion of the napkin is no more risible than the strategies that have emerged to cope with countless failed apocalypses (Stone 2000). COSG is aware that humour is subversive; that feasts of fools and carnivals throughout history have enabled the downtrodden "to 'get back'—if only symbolically and only for a day—at those who … wield power over them. Laughter is used to flatten social hierarchies" (Duncombe 1997: 109).

The paradoxical nature of humour is the key to making sense of COSG's seeming contradictoriness. Just as the date of the apocalypse turns out to have been a silly mistake, COSG inverts all expectations of religion. "Bob" Dobbs is everything that a messiah-deity should not be; crude, stupid, lecherous, greedy, and often drunk or stoned. This form of culture jamming subverts "religion's portrayal of its gods and saints as virtuous, flawless, wise and lofty, not mired in the mess of life" (Cusack 2010: 103). Much COSG doctrine is in very bad taste, featuring profane language, scatological humour, and adolescent male stereotypes about women and sexuality. Yet, these are often extremely funny: Excremeditation is a religious practice in which members refuel spaceship Earth with the methane from their excrement (Stang 2006: 154–155); COSG's money-making ambitions are clearly stated in an advertisement, "Move over Scientologists and Masons. HERE COMES THE NEW RUTHLESS BUSINESS CULT!" (SubGenius Foundation 1994: xix); and its abuse of all non-SubGenii is unrestrained, "[d]erogatory terms for the normal [include] Yoke Wearer … Kool Aid Drinker … Sleepwalker … Believer … AutoMeat … Saucer Fuel … Statistic … Consumer" (Stang 2006: 112). The Conspiracy is now virtually total. This is not surprising: as Stang gleefully informs his readers, "OF COURSE there's an evil conspiracy of rich fucks; there have always been several. The new problem is that there might end up being *only one*" (119). Humour, which provokes the laughter of aggression, the laughter of incongruity, and the laughter of relief, "is the most potent weapon of the marginalised" (173). Further, mocking, blaspheming, joking about serious subjects, and the like, is fun.

5 Conclusion

Almost all academic commentators on cosg reject its claim to be a religion, and classify it with Discordianism as a 'fake religion'. Yet, Stang and Drummond take no prisoners in their estimation of what the church is, and what they are engaged with in creating it. It is, they insist, a

> **certified religion** of scorn and vengeance directed at *THEM*, the *enemies* of us **Outsiders**. It is "self help" through *scoffing* and *blaspheming, frenzied fornication* and the *Mockery* of Graven Images.
>
> SUBGENIUS FOUNDATION 1987 [1983]: 12

This surreal revolution is necessary because the Conspiracy has reached near-total status, and the pursuit of Slack, the ability to resist working, buying, selling and the whole capitalist system gets more difficult every day. Despite COSG's extensive Internet presence, Slack is essentially low-tech, "doing more

with less … finding enjoyment less in Nintendo and Disneyland and more in contemplating turtles swimming, in exploring old buildings, in talking to others, and in creating one's own culture" (Duncombe 1997: 93).

COSG manifests inherent contradictions. The most significant are: the critique of materialism whilst advertising "the Sacrament of the Thirty Dollar Offering" (SubGenius Foundation 1987 [1983]: xiii); to make the subscriber a COSG minister, and the command to "buy SubGenius"; and the excoriation of the Conspiracy while simultaneously elevating "Bob," the salesman messiah. It has been argued that these are best interpreted as forms of culture jamming or, in Debordian terms, counter-spectacle. COSG is unambiguous in its use of the motif of the conspiracy; it may be that the narrative of Yetis, Atlantis, and the extraterrestrial apocalypse is not intended to be read literally (though it is no more objectively unlikely than the theology of Scientology, or, for that matter, Christianity), but the narrative of the consumer capitalist totalitarian state, "it's the *same power elite* in control" (SubGenius Foundation 1994: 92), is most definitely to be taken seriously. The subversive use of humour provides both the interpretive lens and the political strategy to bridge the gap between literal and metaphorical 'takes' on COSG, and the laughter of liberation results from the mockery of everything. The Conspiracy is real and powerful, yet it is also a 'con' as the acquisition of money and goods brings only alienation, not fulfilment. The COSG spiritual ideal of Slack opens up a space in which it is possible to breathe freely, outside of the 'iron lung' of consumption that the Pinks take for reality.

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Afterword: Further Reflections, Future Directions

Egil Asprem, David G. Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal

1 Where Do We Go from Here?

The ambition of this volume has been programmatic: to establish the study of conspiracy theories and religion as a significant interdisciplinary subfield of religious studies. The chapters have, we hope, shown not only that conspiracy theories are interwoven with key concerns in the discipline (such as how religion relates to identity, politics, and violence, and how it is grounded and shaped by cognitive as well as social processes), but also that the study of religion has much to contribute to our understanding of conspiracy theories, or 'conspiracism', in general. Being a first step, the volume does, however, have its limitations. We wish to make some closing reflections on the key points that the chapters of this book have brought to light, and in particular, where we see the need for further research.

1.1 *Geography and Cultural Diversity*

One of our driving ambitions in selecting chapters for this volume was to get a broader sample of empirical cases covering geographic and cultural contexts beyond the 'Christian occident', or at the very least outside the 'anglosphere'. With cases from China and Japan to South Africa and Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and the Middle East, we have at the very least expanded drastically on the usual sample for studies of conspiracism. One could still wish for more: notably, we have not touched on South America, equatorial Africa, or the Indian subcontinent, each of which would bring up unique cases where religion and conspiracism connect. Moreover, the studies included here have been on literate and often tech-savvy populations: ethnographic work on conspiracism in non-literate societies might throw up important data.

The ambition to broaden the global scope also comes at a price. Important parts of global conspiracy culture derive from Western exports, and both historically and contemporarily, Western religions have played a role in their development and dissemination. The best-known forces were only discussed in passing in this volume. Apocalyptically inclined Protestant churches have, for example, long been hotbeds of conspiratorial revelations (O'Leary 1994; Boyer 1992), and their narratives inspire the broader "dark occulture" (Partridge 2005)

and "improvisational apocalypticism" (Barkun 2003) that suffuses everything from popular culture's conspiracy tales to New Age conspirituality and far-right tales. The traces of Protestant conspiracy culture can be seen throughout the book, although it only takes centre in the South African case. While the Roman Catholic background to the first tales about Illuminati and influential strands of Judeo-masonic conspiracy theories has briefly been discussed, a systematic mapping of conspiracy culture in contemporary Catholic churches, whether in establishment or oppositional modes (for an example, see Cuneo 1997), remains to be done. Indeed, there is a volume to be made by looking specifically at the large traditions, covering both their mainstreams and subcultures, and in situations of power and of opposition. Such a work, too, should be cross-cultural, and cover multiple religious traditions, but it should also cut deeper into history.

These caveats aside, what have we learned from the cross-cultural selection of this volume? One point is that it shows how conspiracism does not belong to any particular culture, religion, or region. Obvious though this may be, it bears repeating as long as the public (and to some extent the academic) discourse tends to view conspiracy theories as simply a synonym for (Christian, Muslim, or Fascist) anti-Semitism, as the province of the politically disenfranchised in post-industrial societies, or as connected to some form of American exceptionalism (for example as an expression of its millennialist dreams or its paranoid nightmares). The global, cross-cultural, and cross-religious prevalence of conspiracism demonstrates that in terms of *explaining* this phenomenon, it is not enough to focus on local factors alone, or to attribute it to a single religion, ideology, or social group.

A global approach also brings to light entire research domains that transcend local boundaries. For example, several chapters show how specific conspiracy narratives travel between groups, sometimes crossing the borders of nations and continents. Studying these transnational flows should be a central objective for an epidemiology of conspiracist narratives, and again the study of religion can contribute with important perspectives. One such angle is the recent interest in global, 'entangled histories' of religion, inspired by postcolonial scholarship (see, for example, Bergunder 2012; Bergunder 2014). Such perspectives focus on how religious concepts and identities—including the very category of 'religion'—are produced through the global entanglements of people, institutions, and discourses, from the age of colonisation until the present. Conspiracy narratives, it seems to us, are an integral part of this globally entangled history of religions.

Another useful concept is that of 'glocalisation'. Originally developed in the context of business strategy, signifying "the tailoring and advertising of goods and services on a global or near-global basis to increasingly differentiated local

and particular markets" (Robertson 2012: 194), it offers a useful, consumer-side perspective on the export and import of conspiracist narratives in the form of mass-marketed books, or viral podcasts and YouTube channels. In the present volume we have seen such processes of glocal adaptations in, for example, the spread of American right-wing conspiracism to Japan, the adaptation of anti-modernist French theories in post-Soviet Russia, or the reshaping of UFO discourses in Albanian and Greek conspiracy theories of a nationalistic bent. Ideas picked up at the periphery may then feed back to the centre, bolstering their claims or adding new spice. Similar perspectives of entangled histories and local adaptations of transnationally transmitted narratives could be applied to prominent conspiratorial views today, such as the anti-Muslim 'Eurabia' theory.

1.2 *Mediatisation: Internet, Social Media, Popular Culture*

The study of how narratives spread, transmute, and are put to different uses locally is, in our day and age, inseparable from the *mediatisation* of conspiracism and religion (see, for example, Lövheim and Lynch 2011; Hjarvard 2011). When the distribution of information in societies is reorganised around new media technologies, it creates new forms of social interaction, new types of networks, and also shifts the locus of cultural production and modes of consumption. The Internet has dominated public discourse about the apparent 'pandemic' of conspiracy theories in modern societies, giving the impression that this particular technology has ushered in a new 'age of conspiracy theory'. As Uscinski, DeWitt, and Atkinson showed in their important contribution to this volume, things are not so simple: if anything, conspiratorial logic may even be less prevalent in the political landscape today than it was half a century ago, in the pre-Internet age. However, in exact parallel to what studies of the mediatisation of religion suggests, the way that conspiracy theories get embedded in new media technologies may have increased their *visibility* and moved them into new social arenas, rather than boosted their prevalence per se. Just as the mediatisation of religion adds nuance to the secularisation debate (religious participation and organisation continues to decline in modernising countries even as the visibility of religion increases on the mediated world stage and in popular culture), the mediatisation of conspiracy theories may bring nuances—and perhaps some reassurance—to those who fear that the Internet is shaping a new generation of paranoid irrationalists. Indeed, the prominence of conspiratorial tropes in pop music, film, and television reminds us that conspiracy narratives are engaged with in multiple ways—including as entertainment—something future research needs to take into account.

1.3 *State Actors and Organised Religious Bodies*

The volume also points to the need to study some of the power-related variables in more detail, particularly the role of state actors and organised religious bodies. While much research (including a majority of the chapters in this book) has focused on conspiracy theorising as a strategy for the marginalised, it is a big mistake to forget that the most impactful and indeed calamitous instances of conspiracism happen when it is issued from the high peaks of power. From the Holocaust to more commonplace instances of authoritarian nativism, accusations of conspiracy have been used as motivation for subjugation, persecution, and mass murder. More recently, conspiracy narratives have helped fuel autocratic power grabs in countries such as Turkey, Hungary, and Poland. More broadly, policies against ethnic and sexual minorities have often been legitimised with allegations of (usually foreign) conspiracies aimed at weakening (or 'effeminising') the social body.

Some of these conspiracy topics thus play right into the moral politics of religious bodies and make use of religious doctrines as a source of authority. But the *relations* between state power and organised religion have varied. They vary in the degrees of freedom organised religion has *from* state power and *within* the legal systems; they vary in degrees of complicity and opposition, and in the primary direction of influence with regard to narratives and material practices. In this volume, we find multiple cases where relations differ, from Sri Lanka and Myanmar to South Africa. More case studies from a larger swath of regions are always welcome; however, what we really need is *systematic comparative research* that studies the many variables brought forward here in more detail. One obvious project for future comparative studies would be to look at conspiracy theories in the interplay between 'fundamentalisms' (Marty and Appleby 1991) and politics, assessing their functions, mapping recurrent themes, and tracing the flow of narratives between 'political' and 'religious' contexts.

Most analyses of religion, politics, and conspiracy theory are about the complicity of religion in the abuse of state power, how it radicalises politics, or how religions are persecuted by state and other political actors. Here we should pause to note a relative gap in research: the role of organised religion in *opposition* to conspiracy-fuelled politics. Religious actors, including religious bodies, are not unitary. They are collectives composed of actors with varying interests. We know that religious bodies have *also* been among the critical voices when 'conspiracy theories' have been circulated and used to promote policies, but there are few case studies and, again, no systematic investigations into where in the hierarchies such opposition tends to emerge, under what circumstances, or to what effects.

1.4 *Fear and the Body*

We have strived to collect contributions from a fairly wide range of disciplines; nevertheless, there are methodological lacunae. We have, for example, been unable to provide any chapters that focus on the *bodies* of those involved in the conspiracist milieu. While the majority of popular and academic work focuses on the brains of conspiracists (the beliefs they hold and the cognitive mechanisms that produce and support these beliefs) and the broader cultural processes that enable them, embodied approaches are largely missing. Focusing on the body would challenge the primacy of 'beliefs'; it is with our bodies that we communicate with others, where anomalous and transformative experiences are felt, and it is bodies that act on beliefs. Perhaps this is why bodies, with all their vulnerabilities, are such a prominent motif of contemporary conspiracy narratives, from RFID implants to extraterrestrial sexual experimentation to immuno-invasion through vaccines, fluoride, and hormones in the food chain. Such concerns are unusual in being supported on both the left and right of the political spectrum. Indeed, there is a need for research on how some of the cognitive drift between alternative healthcare, conspiracism, and the New Age milieu is mediated by the body, as the pursuit of bodily health leads one eventually into the broader marketplace of marginalised ideas.

Another aspect of body and conspiracy theory we unfortunately lost along the way is that related to sexualities and gender identity. It is an obvious topic for studying the connection between religion and conspiracy theory, as regulating the intimate body and social (sexual) relations is a prime activity of both religion and politics of collective identity. Conspiracy theories of this sort seem to go hand in hand with not only conservative religion, but also with authoritarian, nationalist politics that makes the fight against modern ('Western') decadence a primary goal. We need to know more about the usage, reach, and consequences of these tales, and the roles that religion play in their articulation.

We also lack adequate research on gender and conspiracism. The chapters of this book have challenged the popular stereotype of the conspiracy theorist as white, uneducated, and disenfranchised, but we have not challenged its maleness. What research there has been suggests, however, that there is close to a 50–50 split in the audience for conspiracy (see, for instance, Bruder *et al.* 2013), though there appear to be differences in interests and socio-economic background (see Robertson 2016: 19–20). The equal distribution of 'belief' still does not tell us much about everyday consequences and involvement in groups of 'believers'. Given that research shows that women have higher rates of involvement with both traditional and alternative religions (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012), one could speculate, following the stereotype, that women are more drawn to the religious aspects of the milieu and men to the conspiratorial.

Alternatively, it may be that, as with many religious movements, while the prominent figures are typically male, it is women who do the day-to-day labour of transmitting and enforcing the narratives. Further research is needed before we can do more than speculate.

1.5 *Disciplinary Formation*

The study of conspiracy theories and the critical study of religion are mutually supportive. Religious studies has a legacy of 'bracketing' truth claims, and instead placing these claims in social and historical context. Focusing on *context* rather than *content* helps to keep an analytical outsider perspective. It may also help to *explain* content and provide insights into the hidden social currents driving the social formations that develop, adopt, and refuse specific conspiracy narratives.

The latter, refusal to accept, is central. A critical turn in the study of conspiracy theories requires us to also examine why certain narratives about the world are set apart and denied further investigation by social formations—scholars included—while others are not. This demands that we look more closely at the assumptions about the world we can observe among different groups of actors (see Boltanski 2014). What, if anything, stabilises the social world, gives it an expectation of regularity so that something may stand out as particularly suspicious? Where this stability is located and how it is evaluated influences what may be seen as 'clues' and who the suspects are when normality is breached and order threatened. Conspiracy narratives mobilise for or against an idea of order. Who destabilises the apparent stability of reality, and are they seen as authors of good or evil? When flows are seen to represent a threat to the purity of territory (Boltanski 2014: 22), we tend to be in the terrain of nativism, with evil forces on the inside opening boundaries to the evil outside. When the reigning order itself is the threat, the narrative questions both power and knowledge regimes in favour of alternative knowledge-claims, often "subjugated knowledges ... located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (Foucault 1980: 82).

This is where we usually locate 'conspiracy theory'. But a critical stance needs to look more closely at narratives that segue in the background, as just another piece of news, sometimes contested, but rarely dismissed. This is where we are more likely to find the conspiracy narratives promoted by the powerful, when the world that is produced is powerful enough to be taken for granted. Religion could, theoretically, be important here, as it is one of the plausible guarantors of a just world, and a way to stabilise worlds. But as touched on above, it may serve in multiple roles: conventional ('priestly') religion, at least among Western, Educated, Rich, and Developed (WEIRD) people, has but a

small correlation to conspiracy thinking, whereas 'prophetic' (Bromley 1997) religion is very highly correlated (see Oliver and Wood 2014).

2 Pessimistic Afterthoughts, or, Why the Field is More Relevant than We Wish it Were

We opened this volume with the observation that conspiracy theories are one of the defining issues of our age. The contents have done nothing to dispel this impression, although the reasons why may be more complex than we initially thought. Current events show a resurgent use of conspiracy theory from places of power. They serve to sap the foundations of liberal democracy in increasingly authoritarian regimes, but they are also increasingly visible in international politics. Conspiracy theories are weaponised to undermine not merely political opponents domestic and abroad; they are used to undermine belief that visible order and visible power is anything but a shadow play for power behind the scenes, to undermine trust and belief that knowledge for alliance building and effective opposition is even possible (for instance Pomerantsev 2014).

What role does religion and the study of religion have in all this? 'Religion', as mentioned above, is more than a conservative force to stabilise the world-constructions and legitimise the essentialist identities of authoritarian regimes. The very act of conspiracist de-legitimisation of the current order may involve religion, from the 'priestly' to the revolutionary, on the opposite side. The domain of 'religion' contains a motley crew, but even in highly secularised societies, they create identities that may make for strong mobilisation. How the dynamics play out and why—that is part and parcel of the study of religion.

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